Jai Yaudheya

RAHUL SANKRITYAYAN

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JAI YAUDHEYA

Rahul Sankrityayan

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KITAB MAHAL

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Preface

"Jai Yaudheya is a historical fiction." It is a portrayal of the socio-political condition of the period circa 350-400 AD (Gupta calender 30-80). Yaudheyas were a very powerful republic situated between Yamuna-Sutlej and Chambal-Himalayas. History and our chroniclers from the yore have assumed a very cruel silence about its existence and fate. In fact, if they had their way, even the name 'Yaudheya' would have been wiped from the annals of history. We must thank our luck that their coins got buried and survived to tell us the story of this forgotten republic. It is said that dead men tell no tales, but in this instance these humble coins have testified to the heinous crime of deliberate forgetfulness that history has committed upon Yaudheyas. Today, even such distinguished historians as Dr. Altekar of Banaras Hindu University accept that the reign of foreign invaders Kushanas was ended not by the Guptas or Bharshivas but Yaudheyas.

Samudragupta's inscription upon an Ashokan pillar (earlier at Kaushambi, now placed inside Allahabad fort) mentions Yaudheyas who accepted his sovereignty and were in return exempted from taxation ('Sarvakaradanagyakaranpranamagaman'). This inscription is a proof that Samudragupta did not abolish the Yaudheya republic, but fifth century onward we now longer come across any reference to this republic which indicates that most probably it was Vikramaditya who was responsible for its demise.

This work of fiction is the story of the demise of this glorious republic. Historical sources have been used to name the kings, princes and high officials of the Gupta empire. Yaudheyas have been almost wiped from the historical records so I had to rely upon my own imagination to name the characters. For the portrayal of the contemporary society, I have used Kalidasa's works and the travelogue of the Chinese monk Fa-Hien. Historical works of Dr. Altekar, Prof. Rakhal Das Bannerjee (The Age of Imperial Guptas) and Dr. R.N. Dandekar (A history of the Guptas) and the Guptan inscriptions and coins were a great help in gathering information about this period.

Yaudheya coins are found in the time span ranging from 2nd century AD to 4th century AD. Upon the coins from pre- Kushana period, we see

the following inscriptions- 'Yaudheyanan Bahudhanyakanam' or 'Bhagawaswami Brahmandevay' whereas upon coins from later periods- 'Yaudheya Ganasya Jai' or 'Yaudheyanam Jayamantrashalinam'. Mahakshtrapa Rudradaman's Junagarh inscription (150 AD) pays glowing tributes to the bravery of the Yaudheyas through the following verse- 'Sarvakshtravishkritavir- Shabdaja(to)tsekanam Yaudheyanam'. There is an inscription of a Yaudheya supreme commander in the Bayana tehsil of the erstwhile Bharatpur kingdom, it says- 'Siddham Yaudheyaganapuruskritasya maharaj mahasenapateh pu...brahman purogam chadhishtanam shariradikushalam prishtava likhatyastirasma' (J F Fleet, Inscriptions of early Gupta kings).

It is a question of conjecture as to whether these brave Yaudheyas were completely wiped out. It is possible that a great number of them would have been killed in the war with Guptas (as we see in case of their descendants, Meos who were slaughtered in great numbers by the Tughlaq), but at least some of them have survived. The stretch of land between Bhawalpur and Multan is still called Johiyawar and the inhabitants are referred to as Johiyas (Yaudheyas). Likewise, Kohistan near Karachi is still inhabited by a people called Johiyas and their chiefs are called Johiya-jo-janm. Meos of Alwar and Gurgaon still inhabit what would once have been the Yaudheya land and their traditional songs of wars and courage fill one's heart with nostalgia about bygone eras. Today, they have converted to Islam but much of their ancestors' spirit of independence has survived among them. Their women still sing epics about their men shedding their lives to secure the right to perform well worship for their women.

And what about Agrawals, Agraharis, Rohatagis, Rastogis, Shrimals, Oswals, Varnawals and Gahois? These mercantile castes too are descendants of Yaudheyas, forced to take to trade after defeat in the war with the Guptas.

Historical works have provided the skeleton for this novel whereas I have supplied its muscles and sinews through my own imagination.

-Rahul Sankrityayan

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Samudra Gupta and the Yaudheyas

My oldest memory goes back to the time when I was about four years old. But the purpose for which I am leaving behind my life story necessitates that I begin with events which occurred three years before I was born. Fifty years have passed since then; I have witnessed events which make me doubt whether future generations would even remember the names of Yaudheyas. Perhaps nobody would be left to tell the story of the republic for which millions of Yaudheyas embraced death. We are the ones who broke the back of Devaputra Shahi (Kushana), but now the Gupta dynasty wants to claim this glory for itself. Two and a half centuries ago it was us who crushed the might of king Mahakshatrap Rudradaman. He never dared to cast an evil eye upon our glorious republic again. Afterwards, we were the ones to decide how much land the Ujjayini Kshtrap, which shared its border with us, could claim for itself. Yaudheyas were the ones who forced the Shaka Kshtrap into oblivion, but now court poets like Kalidasa are trying to bestow the credit for this victory too upon the Guptas.

This story begins three years before I was born. Samudra Gupta, who had claimed for himself the pompous title of Param Bhattarak Maharajadhiraj started his third victory campaign towards the west. Acchyut of Ahicchtra and Nagasena of Mathura had already handed over their sceptres to him, but when he started his southern campaign towards Kanchi, they declared independence. Samudra Gupta returned from south and once again invaded Acchyut of Ahicchtra. Nagasena and a number of other kings tried to help him, but as it were, they were of no match to Samudra Gupta's armed might and superior military tactics. After he had conquered Mathura, Samudra Gupta began to cast covetous glances upon the Yaudheya lands. He had heard the tales of our healthy cattle, our fecund soil that yielded gold, our prosperous villages and flourishing cities. But he also heard that we accept no king and that the entire Yaudheya jana (people) had equal say in ruling the republic. To counter the assaults of Devaputra (Kushan) and Mahakshtrapa, we had set up a unified republic along with the neighbouring republics of Arjunayans and Kunindas; the three were united, but for all practical purposes autonomous from each other. Samudra Gupta made the mistake of presuming that this loosely unified government would be blown asunder under the attack of his efficiently organized Magadhan army. But he was proven wrong and later forced to admit that in all his three great campaigns of conquests he had never had occasion to come across an enemy as resolute as us. Yaudheyas

love their motherland immensely and they defend their republic with their lives.

Not just the young men, but even the old,women and children, the entire Yaudheya jana took to arms to defend their republic against the invaders. Freedom or death were the only two choices that we had been taught to think of. Warlords from Magadha, Licchavi, Kasi, Kosala, Vatsa, Panchala, Antarvedi and a number of other nations kept hurling their soldiers into the jaws of death at the command of the King of kings but a decisive victory for him seemed nowhere in sight. Yaudheyas were dying too. As the war raged on, the Gupta army, suffused with religious fanaticism, began to set fire to our villages and ripe crops. Even the children and old were delivered painful deaths. The Magadhan commanders believed that by striking terror into our hearts, they could force us into surrendering. But we held on. Nothing it seemed, could break the undaunted spirits of our people. Samudra Gupta was declared a devil and crowned with the most demonic epithets of cruelty that the Yaudheyas could imagine. But in retrospect, compared to the ignominies committed by his son Chandra Guptá, it would appear that Samudra Gupta was in fact a brave and generous king. No sooner did he learn that his army had been murdering women, children and old and had burnt peasants' houses and ripe crops, than the pangs of guilt began to torment his conscience. He severely reprimanded his Baladhikrita (captain of the army) and Sandhi-Vigrahika (minister of war) for these dishonorable acts and then wrote a letter addressed to Yaudheyas in his own handwriting. He apologized for the atrocities committed by his soldiers and assured us that being a grandson of the republic of Licchavis himself he does not desire the dismemberment of our republic. He wrote further that he respected Yaudheyas for liberating the motherland from Devaputras and their Persian masters (Sassanids), an act of bravery that commanded utmost deference in his eyes. The fearlessness of Yaudheyas reminded him of another equally dauntless dynasty, the Licchavis, to which his ajjuka (mother) Kumardevi belonged. Licchavi's too are kshtriyas with a thousand year old legacy of courage behind them. He wrote further that he had finally understood that Bharat could be saved from invaders like Kanishka and Menander only if all her kings and republics agreed to bring their swords and tradition of producing brave warriors under a common banner. All that the 'Licchavi scion' desired, he wrote, was to become that banner and he did not covet an inch of our land. "My only desire is that Yaudheyas too should join their swords with mine for the noble cause of wiping out the scourge of foreigner mllecha invaders from our motherland. Such barbaric atrocities of war upon a republic which deserves no less deference than my own mother's clan! I am willing to end this war at this

very moment if only Yaudheya commanders agree to join hands with me to wage war upon foreign invaders. I have ordered my commanders to stop the war for seven days and am hopeful that during this time my Yaudheya compatriots would oblige me with an audience and allow me to share with them what lies in my heart."

Having witnessed the immense loss and brutality unleashed by the war we were forced to consider this overture. Moreover, the conciliatory tone of Samudra Gupta's letter had inspired some confidence. So we agreed to send to Mathura, Yaudheya Republic's Puruskrita (chosen leader), my father Mahasenapati Kumar Yaudheya, the Puruskrita of the Arjunayan Republic Nara Varma, Kuninda Republic's Puruskrita Rohit and the Mahapuruskrita of the unified government of the three republics Sushena Yaudheya, to negotiate peace terms with Samudra Gupta. Samudra Gupta's grand reception for the representatives of the three republics and his sincere tone convinced the four chosen leaders that a peace agreement could indeed be worked out. Samudra Gupta proposed a joint alliance of the Guptas and the three republics against the foreign invaders, for which the latter were required to contribute a small sum of money. Convinced that Samudra Gupta's terms were not unreasonable, the four leaders returned to the joint assembly of the unified republic and put the peace proposal to its consideration. After some deliberation all three republics ratified it and the war ended. Though the leader of the unified republic Sushena held the highest rank, Samudra Gupta was drawn more towards the Puruskrita of the Yaudheya republic, Kumar Yudheya, who appeared to him the wisest among the four representatives. After the treaty was signed, Samudra Gupta expressed his desire to visit the Yaudheya capital Daca (Agrodka) and address the Yaudheya council as a gesture of friendship and peace. In a few days time, Samudra Gupta arrived at Agrodka accompanied by only a handful of Pratiharas (bodyguards) and a few of his lords and addressed the Yaudheyas in their assembly hall. His voice choked as he expressed remorse over the brutalities that we had to face due to the mindless war unleashed by him. His eyes brimming with tears, he said "I am responsible for the excesses committed by my army, let me present my head to the Yaudheya jana, so that it may punish the Licchavi scion in the manner in deems just!" Yaudheyas' eyes were already wet, and then when Samudra Gupta approached Maha Senapati Kumar Yaudheya and tried to touch his feet, he stopped the emperor midway and embraced him. Our hearts melted at this sight and we decided to leave the past behind and forgive him. Afterwards Samudra Gupta met all the council members in person. News about happenings at this meeting spread among Yaudheyas like a forest fire. All enmity was forgotten and people began to sing praises to the modesty of the King of kings. After some days, when Samudra Gupta

married my elder sister Dutta and accepted her as his head queen, Yaudheyas' jubilations knew no bounds, they had now accepted him as one of their own.

My sister's first son Ramagupta was born at Patliputra. When Dutta became expectant the second time, she expressed to Samudra Gupta her desire to visit her parents' home. So the second son Chandra Gupta was born at Agrodka. Three months after this, I came into this world. My sister was still at Agrodka then; upon receiving several letters from her husband requesting her to come back she returned to the imperial capital Patliputra after one year. Dutta loved me more than even here own son Chandra. Though there were numerous wet nurses, she would make him drink her own milk,"there is nothing like Yaudheya milk." Dutta would often take me into into her arms and breastfeed me as well. Dutta was my sister and also my wet nurse mother. I can never forget the affection that she showered upon me. Before leaving for Patliputra she asked my mother to let her take me along. It was not easy for my mother to part with me. I was her only son and had been born very late in her life, but she could not refuse Dutta's request. So she promised Dutta that I would be sent to Patliputra after an year. But sadly my mother did not live to see the end of the year. When the news of our mother's demise reached Dutta she came to Agrodka and took me along to Patliputra. I was still so young then that I can barely remember my mother's face. People say that Dutta looked just like my mother Jayasena. Whenever I saw her face I was reminded of my mother. She had an extremely affectionate nature. Though she was the head queen of the King of kings, Dutta did not have a trace of conceit that is usually seen among the ladies of the royal household. I seldom saw her scold even the humblest of slave girls and chettis. Two years before the death of Samudra Gupta (372 AD), when she passed away, our extended family, the entire royal entourage and even the common city women went into mourning for months. I was in Sinhala then, so I got the news much after she had passed away. For months my mind remained overwhelmed with sadness. I left Anuradhpur's Mahavihar for Chaityagiri and spent several months there trying to overcome my grief, it seemed then that nothing could give me solace.

Childhood

As far back as my memory goes, I can hardly remember any incident from my childhood of which Chandra was not a part. We were like blood brothers. Chandra was extremely headstrong as a child. His playmates

would refer to him as 'Chand' (the terrible) in his absence, but towards me he was always gentle. He ruled over the chettis, consorts and queens of the harem with an iron hand- though he was still just a child, nobody dared to disobey him. Ajjuka's affection and indulgence had made him extremely stubborn. Even the slightest suspicion that his will was not being obeyed could throw him into a destructive rage. He would then go to the pleasure garden at the palace, and settle down like a statue, refusing to talk to anyone for hours. On such occasions Ajjuka would kiss my face, hug me and say "Go child, you are only one who can persuade him." And it is indeed true that I do not remember a single occasion when I went to a sulky Chandra and somehow or the other could not make him smile again. With age, Chandra changed, or it would be more appropriate to say that though his nature did not change much, he learnt to curb it. Sumudra Gupta too was affectionate towards me, but I did not feel the same warmth in his presence as I did with Ajjuka. It is possible that his preoccupation with the state work and the demanding task of attending to his many thousand queens did not leave him with much time to open up to us or play with us. If at all he could spare some time, he reserved it for Rama-he was after all the crown prince. Rama was very gentle natured, the exact opposite of Chandra. People often took advantage of him. Like all children we too loved to listen to stories, and we had the benefit that stories from all over the world were available to us. The King of king's harem had a Greek attendant whose old mother Kulupa had many an interesting tale to narrate. Her long hair fell on her chalk white face. Though she was almost seventy years old there was not a single wrinkle on her face. She was our favourite attendant. Ajjuka too treated her with respect. Though she had been living in our country for over twenty five years, she still could not speak our tongue properly. It was almost impossible for her to say 'h', so that she called 'Hal' 'al' and 'suh', su. Kulupa would narrate long stories and we had to concentrate to understand that when she said 'a', she meant 'h'. We particularly liked her stories about Greek gods and monsters. But then we would feel scared at night. Rama was more meek than all of us and he was afraid to go into the dungeon even during daytime (we spent the afternoons in the dungeon to escape the heat). I was a bit scared too, but for Chandra, such stories were mere entertainment. He had no fear of ghosts and spirits at all. Terrorising Rama was his favourite pastime. Once a number of queens had gathered at the pleasure garden to celebrate the spring festival and worship Kamadeva (the God of love and desire). We too had gone to listen to Charchari being sung. It was believed that the Ashoka tree would burst into blossom if women gargled alcohol upon it and gently hit it with their feet wearing beautiful anklets. Chandra

had declared beforehand that he did not believe in any of this mumbo-jumbo, but for us it was a good show. By the time the ritual got over it was already getting dark. I kept staring at the tree but there was no sign of flowers on it yet. Chandra, however, was planning a prank upon Rama.The crown prince was being led back to his palace by the chamberlain(a eunuch) , a dwarf and another female attendant. Slightly before this Chandra had hid himself in the Tamal vine. Both of us had quietly settled down upon the branches of this vine that hung low upon the pathway leading to the crown prince's palace. It was still not completely dark but Tamal vines are known to be dark even during daytime. As soon as the crown prince reached the vine with his entourage, at Chandra's signal I started shaking the branches wildly while he began to clang a copper pot filled with pebbles and make some beast like noises all at once. The chamberlain tried to beat immediate retreat and dashed towards the palace. But his long cloak betrayed him and he crashed on the floor after running a few paces. The dwarf started yelling and fisting the air while Nipunika chetti collapsed unconscious on the pathway. Rama tried running into the opposite direction, at which he was promptly chased by Chandra still clanging his copper pot filled with pebbles and shouting at Rama in a heavy nasal tone, the sort demons are supposed to possess. The crown prince collapsed after running some thirty steps. Upon seeing him lying unconscious on the ground, now Chandra began to feel somewhat anxious and ran back to me. Feeling that the prank had gone too far, we thought it best to flee the crime scene. We took a zigzag path back to Ajjuka's palace and settled next to her with serious expressions on our faces. Ajjuka was seated on a beautiful ivory backrest. Her left hand rested lightly upon the side rail of the chair while the right one made graceful gestures in air as she conversed with her attendants. Exquisite jasmine flowers were braided onto her long hair. Her armbands, earrings and necklace were all made out of flowers red, yellow and white. An elegant silk dupatta embroidered with silk thread images of swans and ducks hung carelessly from her neck. Chettis (female attendants) were huddled around her, holding the royal parasol, spraying incense, fanning her with chamar (a fan made out of yak hair) and fussing over her in general. Ajjuka was very happy today. The King of kings was to visit her palace for the night. Both of us ran up to her and stood on her either sides. Though we were just seven then our hands could reach her shoulders because she was seated. I began to observe the swans embroidered upon the dupatta which had now slid from her shoulder, while Chandra engaged himself in fiddling with the flowers braided on her hair. Ajjuaka asked for sweets to be brought for us, but we said we were not hungry and like innocent boys stood quietly on her

either sides clasping her shoulders. In some while the din of 'Long live the King of kings' filled the palace, Ajjuka and her chettis stood up to greet the Bhattarak.

The Bhattarak held Ajjuka's hand and sat down with her. Bhattarak's harem had thousands of women, unparalleled beauties from all lands known to the Guptas-fair skinned blonde Greek women, grey haired and silver complexioned Persian women, Gandhari women and beauties from Saurashtra and the hill provinces. Despite this Bhattarak reserved his respect and affection for Ajjuka. Bhattarak and Ajjuka had a special way of celebrating the spring festival. Bhattarak possessed exceptional skill in playing the Veena and Ajjuka was renowned for her sweet voice. Today there was to be wine, music and dance. Veena was brought to the Bhattarak who began to pluck a note, while chetti Madhurika, the skilled dancer, started a dance, imitating the various mudras. Just then, Nipunika came running-panting and fell at Ajjuka's feet, sobbing she said-

"My Queen, mercy, mercy ! Crown prince has been taken away by Brahma-Pishacha (a demon). Jaluka, the dwarf is lying unconscious under the Tamal vine and the chamberlain is blabbering to himself. I was unconscious too." As soon as she finished Ajjuka and Bhattarak both stood up. Chandra ducked behind Ajjuka to conceal his laughter. The royal guard set out for the garden immediately with the chants of 'Victory to Bhattarak", closely tailed by Ajjuka, Bhattaraka, Ajjuka's attendants, the hunchback, the deaf and the dumb. The deaf and the dumb were unable to comprehend what was amiss and they were trying to make the hunchback explain to them what had just happened. The hunchback had considerable trouble explaining the crown prince's disappearance through gestures while at the same time keeping pace up with the royal guard which was now running towards the spot. Chandra, still up to his tricks, somehow managed to explain to the deaf and the dumb that the Brahma-pishacha wanted their sacrifice in return for the prince. The poor creatures wanted to run away but Kurbhak the hunchback and Revtak the dwarf would not let them go.

The news of crown prince's disappearance had reached the royal harem as well and by the time we reached the Tamal vine the entire palace had reached the spot with hundreds of torches. Rama Gupta was still lying on the ground, still as a rock. Though he had regained consciousness, he would not open his eyes out of fear. Ajjuka seemed most worried among all. By now I had begun to feel angry with Chandra. She took Rama's head and put it in her lap. Now somewhat convinced that the demon was gone, he gradually opened his eyes. He still seemed petrified, his body drenched in

cold sweat, even though it was a winter night. Ajjuka and the Bhattaraka brought Rama to their chamber that night.

Though Rama recovered from the shock in some days, the story of Tamal vine's Brahma Pishacha was made famous by Nipunika, the chamberlain and the dwarf who kept narrating the horrific eye-witness account for days. Numerous versions of this Brahma Pishacha's stories cropped up throughout the capital. For the appeasement of the Pishacha, brahmins of Patliputra conducted numerous rites and sacrifices. The Bhattaraka and the Queen on their part gave away millions of dinars(gold coins) in charity at the advice of Pishacha ritual experts.

Tales of Chandra's childhood pranks are endless. He was highly inquisitive and always busy discovering and exploring new things. There were numerous beasts in the palace zoo, among which was a red faced monkey. Chandra for some reason took a liking for him. Everyday he would insist that I should come along to see the monkey. So we went everyday, at times accompanied by Kulupa, at others with some other attendant. The monkey would then be fed a sumptuous treat of fresh fruits from the palace. Within a day or two Chandra managed to win his trust to the extent that he began to sit next to him and caress his back. This alarmed Kulupa a great deal but Chandra managed to shut her down partly through insistence and partly through intimidation. In about two weeks time Chandra had managed to train him. The monkey's leash was taken off and he was now free to roam about. At Chandra's gesture he would rise up on his hind legs and strut around holding his hand like a human. He now became our third partner and constantly kept company where ever we went. For the hunchbacks, the dwarfs, the attendants and the chamberlains, however, all hell had broken loose. Chandra's one small gesture was enough for the red face to climb up on the hunch of the hunchbacks and pummel their heads from behind. Numerous complaints and mercy pleas began to reach the Queen.

"No my Ajjuka, the red face is a perfect gentleman, he loses his temper only when people tease him or throw pebbles at him. Let me bring him to you and you will see how mild mannered a monkey he is." Having said this Chandra set out to bring the red face to the Queen. The attendants let out a collective gasp, "No Bhattini! Do not let him come here!" Within moments Chandra had returned with the monkey. On the way he had given him instructions, as if the monkey could understand everything Chandra said, "See son, be a gentleman in the presence of the Queen. Keep your ears and tail down and try to play as innocent as possible when the queen looks at you. One mistake and I will break your skull with this

stick." As soon as the red face entered the palace, all the attendants stepped aside to give way to him, as though the Bhattarak himself had entered the hall, only the chant of 'long live the Bhattarak' was missing. Dwarfs were trying to hide behind the long cloaks of the chamberlains and the chettis behind one another- especially zealous in hiding being those who happened to have faced the monkey's wrath in the past. Ajjuka too began to seem somewhat reluctant at the sight of the monkey, but she had full faith upon her 'Dev'; (she used to call Chandra by that name then and when I was present too, our name called out together would become 'Jai Dev'). Chandra came and sat near Ajjuka's feet; the 'red face' too came and quietly sat down beside him. Chandra began, "See Ajjuka, he is such a gentleman, people bait him for no reason." Having said this, he held the monkey's jaws and bent his face upwards for Ajjuka to be able to see it. Ajjuka looked at the monkey's thin eyebrows and pitch black eyeballs fixed upon her face. She was by now partly convinced that Chandra was right. Meanwhile Chandra gestured towards Ajjuka's feet and the monkey slowly moved forward and touched them. "He is a gentleman indeed." Ajjuka passed her judgement.

There was once again a collective outcry at this travesty, "No Bhattini!, this is a very mischievous monkey." Red face's victims rushed to produce evidence for the outrages committed by the monkey. Torn clothes were produced and scratch marks shown to the Bhattini. But the verdict had been passed, Chandra had already convinced her.

Just as Chandra did not like the same stories repeated, he could not play the same games for too long. The monkey game continued for just about a month or two and then he began to lose interest. Most of the games he liked entailed a lot of courage. Climbing trees, swimming, diving into the river from a height, riding horses without a saddle on etc. Many of these games were in fact prohibited at Patliputra and Saket (Ayodhya) which served as the second capital for the empire. But after we were five years old, every second year we visited Agrodka for a few days. There Mahasenapati (my father) gave us full freedom to do whatever we desired- "let them play the games they like and spend their days in the manner they desire." He did not think it proper to aggrieve someone else's son. Chandra was a compulsive bully, but Yaudheya boys were tougher than the ones he encountered at Patliputra. And they had little patience for his princely pretentions; everytime Chandra tried to play the bully he was thoroughly thrashed. Chandra learnt very fast that Yaudheya boys were made of sterner stuff. But to give him credit, Chandra never took these beatings that he received to his heart, in fact very soon he became Yaudheya boys' favourite. It would really surprise me to see how drastically he could

modify his behaviour whenever we went to Agrodka for a visit. Yaudheya education was very different from that of Patliputra. They loved their children but made sure that they did not become delicate or weak. It was a ritual among them to wash a sword with water and make the newborns drink it. Practising sword fighting was taught to children very early on. Yaudheya children were taught to be fearless. 'Preserve your lives, but treat the fear of death with utter disdain.' We were hardly ten when we managed to persuade young men, who went into the forest on wild boar hunting expeditions to take us along. At times we would chase the boars on horseback, spear in our hand, at other times we would spend entire nights at the boars' den, waiting for them to return. Chandra and I could shoot arrows by then, in fact our archery skills were much appreciated, but arrows do not kill boars. The proper weapon to hunt boars is the spear and then too one must be careful to hit the boar at a sensitive spot to make sure that it dies. Chandra was fourteen years old when he killed his first boar and after some months I scored my first kill. Both Chandra and I took a lot of delight in hunting. Whenever during the day or even at night a hunter succeeded in killing a boar,deer, porcupine or neel gai he would call out in the wild, "Is there anyone around here? There is a hunt here, come and claim your share." In the beginning it was beyond our comprehension as to why a man who had hunted himself should call out to others and share it with them. My father explained this tradition to us thus "Whatever is produced or accumulated in this world is not the result of the labours of any one of us. After a hundred failed attempts, finally one succeeds in the hunt. But this success is not the fruit of just his own labour, the labours of the rest ninety nine who tried unsuccessfully also went into making it possible. Therefore we ought not to claim the credit for any success alone. From a practical point of view too it is better for all to get at least something rather than one person getting every thing and the rest nothing." This unique consciousness that I received through these hunts had a lifelong impact upon my mind.

So every hunter in the forest got a share of what was hunted. Some of it they carried back home, to be eaten later, but before that dry wood would be gathered and the meat cooked on the spot. Chandra and I could collect firewood very fast even in the dark. By the time the elders skinned the meat we would light up the fire. Wild boars roasted whole over fire taste very good. A boar cannot be roasted easily if the meat is chopped into small pieces because the fat begins to burn causing the fire to flare up into big flames, but if it is roasted whole then the fat burns up slowly. In the royal kitchen at Patliputra such food would have been considered very bland. There the royal cooks added to meat a number of spices like cloves,

cardamom etc brought in from the south seas and other distant lands. I too had become used to the spicy food but meat prepared at Yaudheya kitchens or roasted on fire during the hunting expeditions somehow tasted better to me, even though the style of cooking was somewhat plain. It is possible that I had a bias due to my Yaudheya descent, but as much is undeniable that the spicy meat of the kind prepared at the royal kitchen is more difficult to digest whereas bland boiled or roasted meat is easier on the stomach. Roasting a boar whole on fire takes very long; before putting the boar on fire, its stomach is opened up to clean up the entrails and the liver taken out, which was invariably given away by the elders to boys like us to eat. It was hard work to run around, to remain awake throughout the night or to stay out in the blazing sun during these hunts, but our enthusiasm did not let us dwell upon these small hardships. Rama too visited Agrodka once or twice but he was too scared to join our nightly hunting expeditions.

If Chandra had been asked then whether he preferred Agrodka or Pataliputra, I believe it would have been difficult for him to find a definite answer. As we grew up, our education began and thence we could visit Agrodka less frequently. But whenever we got an opportunity to go there, time seemed to fly by. And coming back to Patliputra always saddened us. Both Chandra and I were skilled at dancing and singing but there was one art form in which he had a distinct edge over me—the art of imitation and impersonation. He had gradually accumulated countless accessories useful for impersonation. White, black and blonde beards, big and small moustaches, different shades of colours to change the skin tone and various different kinds of men's and women's ornaments and clothes. Though I was always reluctant to be party to his pranks, our mutual affection was such that I could seldom say no to him. We were eleven or twelve then. Kurbhak the hunchback was very eager to get married; the royal harem, where he lived, was teeming with feminine beauty but nobody wanted to even so much as look at this poor deformed creature. So many pranks over this sensitive issue had been pulled off upon the hunchback that now he had stopped trusting any of the chettis. Whenever the issue of marriage was broached he would become suspicious. But he probably trusted Chandra for some reason. I managed to convince him that an angelic beauty was eager to get married to him and we came up with a convincing explanation too- "The woman in question is none other than Indra's legendary Apsara Rambha. Due to some inadvertent mistake committed by her she greatly angered Brahma's son Ashtavakra muni, who then cursed her that she would have to forsake her heavenly abode and be born in the human form on earth. Rambha had apologized to him profusely and

begged him for respite. The muni then, may be feeling that the curse was too harsh for a delicate heavenly beauty like her, added a clause to it- "You may re-enter the heaven on one condition—during your earthly existence you will have to marry a hunchback like me." The hunchback convinced that the lady luck had finally shone on him, became extremely eager to meet this heavenly beauty fallen on hard times.

We 'revealed' to the hunchback that the divine beauty had been born as the daughter of the peripatetic lord of Vindhyavati. A full scale conspiracy was then hatched to arrange for a fake wedding. But none of the chettis would agree to play the part of the heavenly bride, and they had a point—if the wedding indeed occurred with proper rites and mantras then the hunchback could always drag the woman pretending to be Rambha to the Dharmasana (the court). After all gods could not be expected to care much for practical jokes. The woman in question would be condemned to spend the rest of her life as the hunchback's lawfully married wife. So Chandra said "I will play the bride." Now it needs to be explained here how Chandra managed to pull this off- I was of a fairer complexion than Chandra, and people said that I possessed a better formed face and eyes than him but Chandra's appearance had an uncanny feminine tenderness about it. Both men and women have long hair, all that was needed to be done was to tie Chandra's hair into a bun. Chaturika, the chetti had refused to play the bride but when Chandra agreed to play the part she mobilized all her skills and experience to transform Chandra into a pretty bride. Chandra's bun was braided with beautiful flowers, his masculine kundals were replaced with feminine earrings. A single strand pearl necklace and another slightly smaller gold beaded necklace in the neck, strings of pearls tied around the upper arms,emerald studded armlets hanging from the wrists, gold bracelets, a multi stringed, beads studded,hip belt with small hanging-tinkling bells tied upon the waist, anklets in the feet and exquisite gold and emerald beads sprinkled on the hair indeed, it was a make up befitting an Apsara. Chaturika had drawn a thin line of mascara over his eyes and coloured the feet with alta, she had sprinkled incense upon Chandra's body and applied rouge over his cheeks. Two oranges served as his breasts which were then concealed underneath a blouse, over which he wore a beautiful dawn red silk dress. After this make up Chandra was brought over to be shown to us. We were stunned, indeed there was no trace of the boy Chandra we knew. I am certain that we could have deceived even Ajjuka that day. The Chettis were extremely amused and so was I. I walked up to him and said, "Brother, there is no trace of the Chandra I know now, all I can see instead is a heavenly bride-to-be." Chandra looked at the mirror and laughed as well, apparently

satisfied with himself for having managed to transform himself into a woman successfully.

The 'bride-to-be' was shown to the hunchback. 'She' played the part of a coy young woman with deft creativity. Then she was questioned regarding the curse in the presence of the hunchback and whether she was willing to marry him. The shy bride nodded her head in acceptance. So the wedding began immediately; the hunchback's joy knew no bounds. Mantras were chanted, gods invoked, women sang songs praying for the well being of the newly wed couple. The hunchback was kept under this illusion for a full month. He was extremely eager to meet his bride but every time his requests for the same were turned down by citing some bad omen or evil planet formation. When the joke got old and people started losing interest in it, one day Chandra sat down with the hunchback and said- "Kurbhak! That beauty jumped into the Ganges today. Jai jumped after her to save her from drowning but she had not jumped to drown. Our eyes were searching for your bride in the current when, instead of her an Apsara slowly emerged from the river—first her deep blue hair, then her moon like face, followed by her thin shell like neck, her pitcher shaped beautiful breasts smooth as quartz rocks, her beautiful huge round hips, rotund thighs and lotus feet gradually surfaced from the water. And within moments she had leapt up and was levitating in the air, mid way between the earth and the heaven. Then she addressed us; "Brothers! I had become free from the curse the moment I was married; now I must proceed to the court of the lord of heaven. Though I am inordinately keen to see my husband, but alas I cannot stay here any longer. Tell him that when the sky lights up with the glow of the full moon, I will descend from the heaven to be with my lover again.

Kurabh was absolutely convinced of the truth of the whole episode. He would go to the pleasure garden on full moon nights and sit there for hours, waiting for his wife to descend from heaven. Dreaming of being with her, gently holding her hand and touching her. How could he possibly forget the only woman ever to came into his life? Of course part of the reason for his loyalty was the fact that none of the women in the palace, not even the ugliest among them, would agree to even so much as look at him!

We Travel to Gandhar

By the time we turned six, three teachers were appointed for our education. To give us company, some children from the aristocratic families at Patliputra joined our school. Vira Sena was the brightest among them

all. Soon he became friends with us and so ours became a companionship of three now. We would pour dust upon slates and write upon them with wooden sticks. Our formal education had begun by making us write, holding our hands "Om namah siddham". This was followed by a grand celebration. Linen clothes and other nice gift were presented to our teachers. Our clan had always been Buddhist. Though he was not a blind adherent, my father had a lot of respect for the teachings of Lord Buddha. I loved to listen to him talk about the life and teachings of the lord but whenever he ventured into the philosophical depths of the sermons it became somewhat difficult for me to follow. Ajjuka's husband's clan was known for its faith in the cult of Vishnu and its deference to brahmins and cows, but her own devotion lied in Buddha's teachings. Every ashtami, chaturdashi and on full moon nights she would visit Ashokaram, situated some distance to the south of Patliputra. There she would pay obeisance to the relics of Buddha (his bones) preserved inside a stupa and then afterwards feed the bhikshus of the sangha and listen to their sermons. So long as I lived at Patliputra, I often gave her company during these visits. Most of my early childhood was spent at the grand palaces of the Guptas, amidst ostentatious that could give a complex to the lord of heaven himself. On and off I did visit Agrodka but most of the times I was surrounded with Sumudra Gupta's innumerable slaves, servants and immense wealth. Being the head queen's brother and prince Chandra Gupta's constant companion I commanded a lot of fear and authority in the royal palace. But what I experienced at Agrodka was a feeling of an entirely different kind. At the royal palace I got respect but it was more out of fear than genuine admiration. Overall I could not count more than twenty people with whom I could behave on terms of equality. My Yaudheya blood pined for the genuine affection, untainted by fear, that I experienced while being with among my kin at Agrodka. There were no less than a thousand households at Agrodka. Commerce had made some families wealthier than the rest so that they even owned slaves whereas there were some who were relatively poor and did all their work on their own. But these differences in pecuniary fortunes somehow did not translate into differences in the social standing. Whether rich or poor, all Yaudheyas were treated with dignity. Food, drinks and festivities were all shared; private feasts and drinking parties were unheard of. More importantly sharing did not entail sentiments of charity or gratitude. Yaudheya collective life was based upon feelings of mutual affection and brotherhood, and hence sharing happened as a matter of duty on the part of the giver and right on part of the receiver. All Yaudheyas were somehow related to each other. During my visits to Agrodka, I rarely had my meals at our own household. By the time I turned twelve-thirteen I had managed to acquire considerable talent in dancing and singing. My

numerous aunts and sister-in-laws competed with each other in indulging me. Such untainted affection ! Because I was my father's only son, I did not have a sister-in-law of my own, but Yaudheyas believe that it's the same blood that runs in the veins of all of them, and hence they were all my brothers and the wives of all of them my sister-in-laws. All Yaudheyas being blood brothers, the entire land owned by them, whether under cultivation or lying fallow is considered the property of the whole clan. At the time of cultivation the land is distributed among families in accordance to the means available to them and at the end of the season it again reverts back to the collective ownership of the clan. This is true not just of Agrodka, but the same pattern was in practice at all other Yaudheya cities and villages like Rohitki, Khandila, Shrimal, Oss etc. Within the Yaudheya land there were no strangers, one could just walk into a city, village or household, introduce oneself as a fellow Yaudheya and be certain of being treated like a distinguished guest. I did this on numerous occasions myself. Yaudheya households might not have the lavish comforts of Samudra Gupta's palace- exotic cuisines, servants, perfumes etc, but the spontaneous hospitality I received at the humble households of my clan brothers made me feel far more at home than all the luxuries of the royal palace. As time passed, Ajjuka could visit Agrodka less frequently, but it was impossible for her to leave her past life behind. And whenever she got the opportunity to spend time there, Ajjuka behaved as though she had forgotten that she was the wife of the great gupta emperor—the mighty conqueror. She generally did not bring her in-laws along and if at all she brought somone, Ajjuka made sure that they were the kind who would not mind leaving behind the excessively ceremonious ways of the king's court. She invariably missed her deadlines to return to the capital; if she told the king that she would be back in a month's time one could be certain that she would be away for at least two months. Though Ajjuka's mother had passed away, her two younger sisters still lived at Agrodka. Ajjuka was close to them; and so also to a number of women from the neighbouring households who were her distant relatives but whom she treated like blood relations.

As she grew older, it became increasingly difficult for her to travel to Agrodka. To make up for her inability to visit her ancestral home Ajjuka would collect mementos, hundreds of them, which would then be sent to her near and dear ones there. She also sent handwritten letters by hundreds, such long ones that some of them ran into several sheets. People would marvel at how she could remember the names of so many of her childhood relations and friends despite being away from Agrodka for so many years. During my visits to Agrodka they would say "Sister Dutta, she still remembers all of us." Once when I told this to Ajjuka she grew very sentimental and said- "My dear Jai!, I can never forget my Yaudheya

roots, they might have forced me into exile, but I will remain a Yaudheya at heart till my last breath."

That year I reached Agrodka at the end of the monsoon season. Since the rivers are full at this time of the year, a number of sea vessels sailing from lands as far away as Yawadvipa reach Kaushambi-though only Magadhan merchants are allowed to sail as far up-river. A big sail fluttering over the mast, we headed west with the wind. I got down at Varanasi and stayed at the Uparika's (the viceroy) palace for a day to pay visit to Rishi-Patan (Sarnath). I think that during my formative years my ancestral religion was as significant an influence upon me as my Yaudheya descent. I could not have proceeded further without paying obeisance to the place where Tathagata had delivered his first sermon. Our boat stopped for one night at Pratisthan (Jhunsi) too. Having been brought up at the capital, I had no interest in the palaces and gardens of the city. My curiosity, however, was aroused by something that even my child's mind found very perplexing. At this city, the confluence of holy rivers- Ganga and Yamuna, many people drowned themselves in the belief that doing so would secure for them a berth in the heaven. Still a child then, I did not have the capacity to reason about whether doing so was right or wrong, but I am certain about as much that during my later life these were the kind of things about the religion of the brahmins which aroused my revulsion towards it.

From Pratisthan we proceeded upstream on Yamuna. We had to stop at Kaushambi for some while. Here too I stayed at the palace of the Uparika (the viceroy). This palace had been built by emperor Ashoka- it had huge pillared halls distinctive of Mauryan architecture. At Kaushambi, I also witnessed two huge stone pillars constructed during Ashoka's time-upon one there were some verses inscribed during the time of Ashoka. The year Chandra and I were born, Samudra Gupta too had got inscribed a long verse upon this same pillar. Though I could read the text it was difficult for me to comprehend any of it because the language was Sanskrit. I was told that it is a beautiful poem composed by Kumaramatya Harisena in praise of emperor Samudra Gupta.

From Kaushambi we set sail for Mathura. This city has numerous palaces constructed during the Devaputra Shahi (Kushana) era; these are now occupied by the high officials of the Gupta empire. We left the boat at Indraprastha, now we were in the Yaudheya land. My luggage had to be unloaded from the boat into a cart, but I did not need to stay back to do it myself. I took a horse and rode straight to Agrodka. This time I had come to Agrodka after a gap of two years, father hugged me and kissed my face. In these two years I had grown considerably and father expressed his

satisfaction that despite being away from the Yaudheya land I had retained the good physique characteristic of our men.

During this visit to Agrodka I got the opportunity to go on a pleasing journey. I had been travelling from Patliputra to Agrodka since I was small, so this journey had lost its novelty for me. This year father had relieved himself from the office of the Puruskrita of the republic. He ran a small trade which was mostly looked after by our servants. From east we bought fine cotton, gold embroidered linen, sandalwood and some other items and sold these in the west; whereas from the west we imported buff rugs, dried grapes, wine and Kamboji horses. This year father was to go himself with his trading caravan, though the purpose was not just trade. The prime reason for making this journey was that he wanted to visit the Dharmarajika Chaitya at Takshila and pay obeisance to lord Buddha's begging bowl preserved at Purushpura (Peshawar). The monsoon was over and the land was beginning to dry up, flood waters in the rivers and rivulets had flown away and the caravan was ready to start its trip now. I told him that I wanted to come along too. As I have said before, my father generally did not like to hinder my spontaneous desires. He had a calm but amiable demeanour and deep love for the republic and its people. Samudra Gutpa had on many occasions tried to give him a high office in his empire but my father never agreed. In his opinion, there was no higher honour than serving the Yaudheya republic. To meet the expenses of our extended family and other near and dear ones he ran a business, but in his opinion money was the root of all evils. He would often say "hankering after trade, wealth and power would eventually cause Yaudheyas' decline." Our caravan was very big, it had around five hundred carts and innumerable camels and horses. The carts were loaded with the money being carried to buy merchandise. Property worth millions was being carried by the caravan, therefore, there was constant threat of robber bands, particularly because at the bank of Satadru (Sutlej) Yaudheya land ended; beyond it lied the empire of Devaputrashahi (Kushanas). But we did not need to fear robber bands, as we had as many as a hundred cavalrymen riding along. The cart driver and other men travelling with the caravan too were capable sword fighters and most importantly Yaudheyas had a reputation of being fearsome warriors. We would stop only at scheduled venues where grain, green meadows and freshwater were easily available and wherever the caravan pitched its tents armed men would stand guard all around it. My father was the leader of our caravan.

After crossing Satadru we began to come across Shaka soldiers and royal officials. I had seen Shakas earlier at Patliputra and elsewhere, but this was the first time I was seeing them in such large numbers. Why do

Shakas love to grow their beards? It was beyond my comprehension then as to why they hated to even so much as trim it a bit; overgrown beards made them look scary. Their cloaks (kanchuk) are much longer than ours, so that they hang below their knees, around their waists they tie a band which is several yards long and they wear pointed caps on their heads. Their trousers lie almost completely hidden underneath their long cloaks and their long boots reach up to their knees. Though Shaka's attire and language are different, their religious beliefs are exactly alike ours- most of them being Buddhists or believers in the brahminical religion. Some are Jains too, but very few Shakas are attracted towards this religion as it is rather difficult for them to give up the temptation of meat. I had grown up at the royal palaces listening to horrific tales about the barbarity of Shaka mlechchhs, but now face to face with them, except probably their beards, I hardly found anything repulsive about them. On the contrary they turned out to be a very hospitable people. Around twenty Yaudheya women too were travelling with us. They would often be invited by Shaka women to their houses for a meal or drinks. Though usually Yaudheya women enjoy dancing and drinking, but on this journey most of them preferred to abstain. Being on pilgrimage, most of them were observing a fast—moreover the women who had come were mostly either middle aged or old.

Having crossed Irravaty (Ravi), Chandrabhaga (Chenab) and Jhelum our caravan headed for Takshila. As the Dharmarajika Chaitya appeared on the horizon, all the men in the caravan stopped to bow at it, women too got down from the carts to pay respect to it. My aunt Devasena was most devout among all; I too imitated everybody else and like them bowed to the Chaitya several times. Out of respect for it, henceforth, all of us walked on our foots till we reached Takshila.

The city of Takshila has very good arrangements for travelling-trading caravans. It has numerous orchards and open fields to camp at and a number of canals for fresh water. The markets are always full of animal fodder, fuelwood and grains. Though the capital of Devaputra is Purushpur (Peshawar), in splendour and wealth Takshila is nowhere inferior to it; in fact latter may easily be considered the commercial capital of the empire. Here I saw merchant princes' palaces so grand that they could any day give royal palaces a run for their money. Trade routes from Kamboj, Kapisha, Vangika, Persia, Ionia and other western nations converge here, however, since the road to the west of Takshila is not suitable for travelling on carts, most of the merchants from east sell their merchandize here, buy whatever they need and return home. Here we also came across the son of Patliputra's merchant, Ganadasa. Their caravan had gone further north on Yamuna to Strughanpur (Ambala) and then arrived at Takshila via the city of Shakal.

Father told me lots of things about Takshila- "Apart from being a center for trade, in the past Takshila was also renowned for being the foremost center for learning. Then students from as far away as Magadha would come here to study". "But now Magadha itself is a major seat of learning, good institutions for education have come up at Ujjayini and Mathura too, so now only students from Uttarapatha (Punjab) and the nations to the west of it are seen here." There are numerous Viharas at Takshila, Dharmarajika Mahavihara being the biggest among them all. On the stone walls of the Dharmarajika Chaitya are carved some of the best specimens of sculpture in the entire realm. In its vicinity are located numerous temples which house exquisite statues of lord Buddha and Boddhisatva Avalokiteshwara. In the prayers halls are kept countless small lamps burning on ghee. They are kept aflame perpetually, round the clock, through the year. My father deposited ten dinars with a guild of ivory makers located near the Dharmarajika Chaitya. They pledged to donate an yearly interest of one dinar upon this deposit, a sum enough for the maintenance of one perpetually aflame lamp at the Chaitya. Father then told me about Dharmarajika's history-"After the lord attained Nirvana, his bones were divided into nine parts and sent to different cities like Rajgriha, Kusinagara, Vaishali, Kapilavastu, Ramgrama etc. At each one of these cities a Chaitya was built to preserve the lord's relics. After around two hundred years when Ashoka became the emperor of Magadha, he got hundreds of Chaityas built throughout his vast empire; and small portions of the lord's remains were placed among them. Ashoka was an extremely devout emperor and so people began to call him Dharmaraja Ashoka; hence the name Dharmarajika for the chaityas built by him." I asked- "But he was the emperor of Patliputra, did his empire extend upto Takshila?"

"Yes indeed, in fact the boundary of his empire extended up to around four hundred miles further west from Takshila. People of those countries are still Buddhist and they remember Dharmaraja Ashoka name with lot of reverence. Royal dynasties rise and fall but the glory of great souls is eternal"

I had seen some Shaka, Persian and Greek Buddhist monks at Ashokaram (Patliputra). Here at Gandhara the largest number of monks seemed to be of Shaka origin and they had a great love for learning. My aunt Devasena was a regular at a nuns' Vihara and she could not stop talking about the learning, teachings and sweet demeanor of the Shaka nun Arya Vashishthi who lived there. Now we crossed Indus and reached the interior part of the Gandhara province. Gandharis' clothes are very different from ours. Their trousers have curvy stitches which leave loopy curves on the surface of the garment. Gandharis' women too wear similar

trousers with the difference that it is broader at the top and narrows down towards the bottom; a design that I found very pleasing to look at. Men and women both wear cloaks. Women also wear turbans on their heads whereas men wear surplices. Sandals are worn by both men and women. Shaka men and women wear similar clothes; similar long cloaks, waistbands, knee length shoes and long pointed caps. Shaka women are less fond of ornaments than Gandhari women, particularly the use of earrings is almost completely absent among them.Gandharis and Shakas are generally fairer than Magadhans and us Yaudheyas. In fact many have blonde hair and blue eyes. Among them blonde women are more sought after than women with black hair. We also came across a large number of Kamboji Buddhists at Purushpur. Among them black hair and eyes are even rarer, most of them have light yellow hair which in some cases is even completely white. I felt bad that Gandharis are forced to live under submission to the Shakas, the latter are afterall the ruling community. Father told me that Devaputrashahi is not an independent king anymore, he pays tribute to the Persian emperor.

We stayed at Takshila for two weeks. Meanwhile, our caravan had managed to sell all of its merchandise. Leaving some people behind to watch over the carts we proceeded to Purushpura on horsebacks. I had heard that Indus is a bigger river than the Ganges, but when we came across it, I noticed that it is much narrower in breadth. Father said that though it is narrower in breadth, its current is deeper and swifter. Indus bank onward we began to come across mountains. It is here that I saw snow capped mountain peaks for the first time, Aunt Devasena would say that Apsaras live among them. I was too young then to ascertain the veracity of this claim.

Having crossed the Indus, we reached Pushkalavati (Charsadda) after a few days ride. The palaces in this city are magnificent; the sculpture and paintings too were better than anything I had seen till then. It was after some years that I got to know that Gandhar sculpture came into being through the contributions and inspiration of Greek sculptors. The city had countless temples, huge markets and broad avenues. We visited Kanishka's mahavihara. My father told me that born three hundred years after the death of Ashoka, Kanishka was as devout a Buddhist king as the former. Purushpura was his capital and he was the one who got constructed this magnificent Mahachaitya and vihara and their gold plated walls. Kanishka had conquered lands as far away as Patliputra. Lord's begging bowl—which is kept in this dazzling temple now—was earlier preserved at Vaishali, the Lichchavi capital. Kanishka ordered his commanders to bring along Lord's begging bowl and an eminent Buddhist

scholar to Purushpura; so the begging bowl was brought over to be placed in this temple. And the renowned scholar who arrived at Gandhara was Suvarnakshi's son, poet prince Ashavaghosha of Saket. I do not think that I had the capacity to register all of what my father would tell me. Many years later, while poring over ancient literature, all these events and characters began to materialize in my imagination. Writing this account as I am after sixty years, it is possible that much of what I recall as having told to me by my father is in fact what I read later myself.

We visited the Kanishka vihar several times to see the begging bowl but I think we spent even more time visiting the Buddhist monk Asanga. Arya Asanga's fame had reached as far away as Patliputra's Ashokarama. His learning and knowledge were immense and yet his nature had a child like simplicity about it. The teacher was over seventy years old; his hair or beard did not reflect his age as he kept them closely shaved. Nor could one gauge his age from his face which was almost completely free of wrinkles. He had a perpetual faint smile on his face. The ochre robe on his glowing golden white skin made him actually look like the sun of knowledge he was. The master was always surrounded by learned monks and lay Buddhists who came to listen his teachings. My father and other disciples would ask him questions about Buddha's teachings and Greek philosophy. Though too young to understand any of it yet, I do not think that I ever felt bored of listening to him speak. On the very first day as I greeted him, he ruffled my hair and said to father- "Devout commander ! Your son seems to be very bright, educate him well."

Father then bowed to him and said- "Arya! please accept my child as your disciple."

"I would have devout commander ! But I have become very old now. I spend most of my time thinking and meditating and whatever little time I am left with is taken up by lay disciples like you. I do not think I would be able to spare enough time to educate child Jai properly."

"Just being at the Arya's feet would teach him a lot."

"No, a lot of his time would be wasted if he became my student. Do you know my younger brother Vasubandhu"

"Of course Arya! Acharya Vasubandhu is renowned for his learning and knowledge in the whole of Jambudvipa. I enquired after him at Takshila and also at Purushpur, but it seems he is not here. Has he gone somewhere?"

"Yes, he has gone towards Prachi (the eastern country). He might be at Saket or Patliputra. Unfortunately he has come to believe, wrongly in my opinion, that if he can produce another Ashoka in some imperial dynasty Buddhism would thrive for five hundred years more."

"Through the aegis of some imperial dynasty!"

"Yes. I understand that Buddhism would be weakened and lose its sheen if it came under the aegis of royal families. Buddhism is for the welfare of the broad masses (Bahujana Hitaya). While going through Tathagata's teachings you must have come across how the kings were born- in the ancient times there were no kings. Jana (the people) managed their affairs themselves; like you Yaudheya's still do, like Licchavi's did during Tathagatha's time. Then people began to accumulate wealth and the division between rich and poor came into being. Have you seen the ditches outside villages?"

"Yes"

"These ditches came into being because earth is dug out of them to erect huge buildings. In the same manner wealth of the rich does not drop from the heavens. Nine hundred and ninety nine must be deprived of the food they eat, clothes they wear and their fruits of labour so that one may thrive, build grand palaces, light lamps made out of gold, wear Chinese silk and fine linen. Can we expect the very people who acquire their wealth by impoverishing the masses (Bahujana) to be true to the spirit of Tathagatha's religion which was meant for the welfare of the masses (Bahujana Hitaya)? Yes, it is indeed possible that after building splendid palaces for themselves, they might spare some of their immense wealth to build a few Chaityas, temples and viharas. Kanishka's dynasty during its three hundred years' reign gradually got constructed a fairly large number of magnificent viharas. Today, possibly even the royal palaces of Purushpur do not possess as much wealth as these viharas. But was Tathagatha's religion meant for accumulation of wealth?"

"No Arya! It was for the well being of the masses (Bahujana Hitaya)."

"You are right devout commander, Tathagatha's religion must be rescued from the stranglehold of royal dynasties, this thought keeps me preoccupied all the time.Tathagatha preferred the food offered by Ganika (prostitute) Amrapali to the royal feast offered by Licchavi princes. What do you think was on his mind?"

"Because the lord wanted to do away with distinction between the rich and poor."

"Not just among the monks but also among the lay followers. Monks-nuns, male devotees-female devotees, these four samghas (orders) were established so that all may proceed upon the path shown by Tathagatha, but what happens today?"

"Buddhists too accept the caste hierarchy in the manner of the followers of brahmins' religion."

"Yes devout commander! Tathagatha's disciples were misled by the belief that seeking the patronage of kings would help it flourish and grow but what has happened now? It is no longer a religion for the welfare of the masses (bahujana hitaya). Tathagatha's disciples failed to understand that he called the four fold organization of his religion 'the sea', because all the streams flow into it and lose their differences.

"But Arya! Brahmins will never let this happen!"

Devout Commander! If the lord had feared the opposition of brahmins, he would never have set the wheel of dharma moving (dharma chakra pravartana-Buddha's first sermon) at Rishipatan (Sarnath). Tathagatha's religion spread in India, China, Persia, Ionia and other distant lands due to its own inherent truthfulness; kings had no role to play in this and brahmins' opposition could not hinder its progress. It is the love for all life forms, zeal to spread the light of truth and the spirit of welfare for all, ingrained in his religion that helped it spread to distant lands. But, what happens in Tathagatha's own birthland today? If one were to look at these viharas, their hoarded wealth and the prosperous villages donated to them by kings, it would seem that Tathagata's religion is indeed thriving. But the truth is that it is rotting away at its very foundations. We are not preoccupied with the welfare of the masses anymore, on the contrary we prefer to live off the riches accumulated through good deeds done in the past."

"So what is the way out Arya?"

"The way out! There is just one way out, the path of the Bodhisattvas-Mahayana-We must not hanker after personal comforts or even spiritual liberation (Nirvana) for oneself; well being of the masses (Bahujana Hitaya) must become the sole purpose for leading one's life. We do not seek our own Nirvana (liberation) neither do we seek heaven till the time even a single being, even a single human is in bondage and pain. Till then our place is among the poor, the suffering and the aggrieved. The lord called his religion 'ehipashyik', its effects must show here, in this very world. The masses in this world are suffering. What do kings and emperors do? Increase the size of their harems from five hundred to five thousand? Plunder the poor to increase their comforts and wealth? And they glorify these heinous crimes by assuming titles like 'King of kings', 'All conquering lord' etc.

"So Arya! Do you dislike monarchy?"

"If Tathagata had any love for monarchical institutions he would have left behind an absolutist leader to lead and guide the Buddhists, but he chose to vest this authority upon the entire collective, the samgha."

"But Arya! Now the situation is such that the monks and the lay followers, unless they have a first hand experience of the functioning of the republics, cannot even so much as imagine a world without monarchs."

"This is the magic of brahminism at work. What do brahmins do, except for plundering the masses in alliance with the kings? Though it is true that today many kings claim to be followers of Buddha, but for all practical purposes they act more like the followers of brahminism."

"Followers of brahmins and cows."

"If one worships the brahmins then one is obliged to worship the cows as well.", saying this Asang burst into laughter.The audience laughed too. Then he began "But we must not laugh about this, in fact this is a matter of great concern, especially because the fate of the masses (bahujan) and the thousands of generations yet to be born is related to this question. By drowning the humankind in a deluge of superstitions and blind beliefs a handful of people can make merry but the devolution of humans to the status of ignorant beasts is a shameful stigma for us. Do you know what the brahmins used to say when the Shakas and the Greek arrived in this country."

"What did they say Arya?"

"Brahmins used to call them mlechchhs. But the disciples of Tathagatha, remaining true to their teachings treated these newcomers with love and respect. They on their part sought shelter in the teachings of Tathagata and made this country their home; every piece of land that Tathagata's feet had ever trodden became holy to them. Sthavira Nagasena's disciple Milinda got constructed numerous viharas. You have yourself seen the result of Shakaraja (king of Shakas) Kanishka's efforts at Takshila and Purushpura. How many beautiful viharas did he build! Before long brahmins realized that it had been a mistake on their part to call these new kings mlechchhs. How could they have let go of the temptation for lavish patronage these kings could provide? So the existing texts were revised and many new ones composed and it was declared that these foreign races, the Shakas, the Greeks etc are in fact kshatriyas who have degenerated because they do not patronize the brahmins."

"True Arya! And as a result, now the Satraps of Ujjayini have been transformed from being Shaka-mlechchhs to being Shaka-kshtriyas."

"So the disciples of Tathagatha tried to promote their religion by seeking the patronage of the kings but they did not realize that brahmins are much better at this game. Tathagata's religion can talk about the equality of all humans, but only brahminism can exalt somebody's status

above the rest of humanity, an artifice that kings highly value. So gradually the kings and their lords are returning to brahminism. If the disciples do not adopt the path of the bodhisattvas-welfare of the masses (Bahujana hitaya) the religion of Tathagata would be wiped out of this land."

I kept visiting Arya Asanga along with my father for many days, listening to his sermons. Now it is difficult to tell whether what I have written here is from childhood memory of those visits or is it a result of my having read his texts later in my life. But I can say as much for sure that this journey and conversations with Asanga aroused my curiosity about Tathagata's ideas. Father encouraged me too. Arya Asanga told father "Vasubandu is in Prachi. Send your child to him to be his disciple. To me he told something that had a lifelong impact on my mind- "Do not accept anything to be true unless you have weighed it thoroughly through your own experience and intellect." As time passed and I grew up, the memory of this first lesson given to me by Asanga did not fade, in fact it became more and more clear to me that he was indeed right.

The grape crop was ripe by then. Gandhar's extensive vineyards glowing golden by now were as tasty to eat as they were pleasing to look at. I had eaten Gandhari grapes on a few occasions but eating months old half dried grapes was nothing in comparison to the experience of tasting fresh fruits directly from the vineyard, standing in its cool shade. I had bright red figs too; at Gandhara I got to taste numerous kinds of trees and fruits that I had never seen before.Though I would not say that I liked Gandhara better than the land of Yaudheyas, it is indeed true that I found its fruits, fresh water bodies and the landscape very alluring. This journey to Purushpur taught me many new things and broadened my horizon in ways that I could realize only later as I grew slightly older. In the extensive markets of this city I would observe people from various nationalities; their strange costumes and gestures. One day I saw people with a very distinct reddish-orangish complexion; and it was not just the skin colour, I also noticed that their men had no beards or moustaches at all. Both men and women had high cheekbones and extremely small eyes. All their clothes were made of animal hide, with the furry side to the inside, only their caps had the furry side to the outside. I got to know that they are Huns and that they had travelled almost five thousand kilometers to trade. At Purushpur you come across lots of Persians too. We could not see Devaputrashahi as he was visiting the court of the Shahanshah of Persia then.

From Purushpur we returned to Takshila and then after several days' travel back to Agrodka.

Education

I reached Patliputra before monsoon. When I told ajjuka about our journey to Gandhara, she felt somewhat disappointed for not knowing about it beforehand; had she known she would have sent some offerings for the Dharmarajika vihara and the holy relics of the Lord. I told her that father had donated some money for the maintenance of a perpetually aflame lamp at Takshila and that he had got engraved both mine and ajjuka's name upon a slab placed next to it. I was very delighted to learn that Acharya (teacher) Vasubandhu had been living at Ashokaram for some while. I told ajjuka about the conversation between Arya Asanga and father regarding my education and requested her to let me become Acharya Vasubandhu's disciple. Ajjuka had visited Acharya Vasubandhu several times to listen to his sermons. She too had deep respect for his profound knowledge of philosophy and his mild temperament. She would often praise the Acharya in the presence of the Bhattaraka, at which he would taunt "Good for you that you have become the disciple of the Acharya but what do you want from us now? That the entire royal household should give up the palace and become his humble servants?" But the truth was that Bhattaraka too respected the Acharya. Harisena had given him the title of Mahakavi (Great Poet) and most of the eminent scholars at the court recognized his stature as one of the greatest logicians and scholars of our times. Parambhattarak had himself gone to meet the Acharya on one occasion and requested him to prolong his stay at Patliputra.

Ajjuka did not immediately accept my request to let me become Acharya's disciple. She would think, "This is my father's only son and my only blood brother, what if being in Acharya's company he himself became a Buddhist monk?" But she knew that another teacher like Acharya Vasubandhu would be impossible to find. The next morning as ajjuka sat next to me, watching me eat breakfast, eager though I was to know what she had decided, I was too scared to ask her. What if she said no? After some while she spoke herself-

"Dear Jai! You wish to study with Acharya Vasubandhu?"

I put my face upon her shoulder and said somewhat impatiently- "My dear ajjuka! Please give me the permission! I want to be his student. Father wants the same too."

"Yes my child, you are right. I have made my decision. You cannot get a better teacher. And I desire that your naughty brother Dev too should study with you. I will request the Acharya to become your teacher; hopefully he will accept."

So ajjuka went to meet the Acharya that day. Though the teacher was somewhat reluctant to settle down at one city, he agreed. Then ajjuka said- "Bhadanta (the respected one) I do not wish to tie you down to Patliputra. Please feel free to stay wherever you desire, Ashokaram, Saket's Kalkaram, Vaishali, Rajgriha or any other vihara. My brother Jai Yaudheya and son Chandragupta would go along with you to whichever city you choose to make your abode. Hopefully, in your company they would learn well and come of some use in serving the will of lord Buddha."

Full moon night of the month of Ashadha arrived; Varshopanayika, the great donation festival to mark the beginning of the monsoon, was celebrated and that same day we started our education with the Acharya. For ten year olds we were quite well read. Till now, most of our education had been in Magadhi (Prakrit), prose-poetry, mathematics and calligraphy. Our knowledge of Sanskrit was very limited. Though we could speak the language a bit but reading books was as yet difficult for us. Acharya enquired about what we had learnt so far; he spent quite some trying to learn where our interests lied.

Our education began in a very interesting manner. Acharya composed "Saptakumarikavadan" and a number of other stories for us. Reading these stories was not at all tiresome. For very long we did not realize that these were in fact new stories that he was composing for us. These stories had many beautiful passages interspersed with equally delightful poetry. When we finally realized that these stories were not from some old text, but were newly composed, we told ajjuka about it. From then on she too would wait for them eagerly. These were not mere stories, they consisted of wisdom that Acharya wanted to teach us, as well as lessons about beautiful prose composition. Ajjuka hired a number of scribes to make several copies of these stories; these were then sent by her to the wives of the empire's lords and eminent merchants.They became so famous that very soon, if she delayed in sending them for some reason, ajjuka would be flooded with letters requesting that the next story be sent. Acharya Vasubandhu's fame spread to distant lands. The acharya was well known for his command upon logic and scholastics but nobody had imagined that he could compose beautiful prose of wisdom in such simple language.

Gradually, as I read these stories my Sanskrit improved. At times Acharya would teach rules of grammar but in a way that it never became uninteresting. I liked to compare Sanskrit words with those of Magadhi to try and understand the differences in pronunciation. Acharya had been observing this. One day he gave me some stories written over old palm leaves and said- "Read these stories, they are written in six hundred years

old Magadhi. I was somewhat perplexed in the beginning-"What sort of Magadhi is this?" But with a little effort and with some help from Acharya I gradually began to read it fluently. I kept thinking about this strange old Magadhi for some days and then asked him- "Bhadanta (the respected one) it seems that this old Magadhi is close to Sanskrit as well as our own Magadhi."

Acharya smiled and said- "You are right child (vatsa), old Magadhi lies in between Sanskrit and modern Magadhi."

"Bhadanta, why do people create new languages? We have Sanskrit as well as our own Magadhi, then why did they need this third language?"

"You think individuals can decide and create new languages! A new language is not created by an individual or even a group of people, rather, they are created by generations. If you could talk to one of your Yaudheya grandmothers born two hundred years ago, you would realize that she did not speak the same language as your mother does."

"So Bhadanta, does that mean that languages keep changing?"

"My child (Vatsa)! Nothing in this world is eternal. Once I was a small child, then I became a juvenile like you, after some years a brown fuzz began to appear above my lips, my body became bigger and stronger and then finally, I do not know when exactly, old age took me in its stranglehold. See, now I have lost most of my teeth, my head has become bald and my eyesight has become weak. I cannot read for too long anymore and before long my back would become bent. So much change from childhood to old age!"

"Bhante, it would have been so nice if we never grew old!"

"So, you wish to be eternally young?"

"Yes."

"And you also wish that you were born a young man?"

"I began to think." Acharya said "If we were to be born as young men there would be no need for mothers. Can a young man be born from his mother's womb?"

"So this means people would not have mothers if my wish came true?"

"Yes, neither the love of mother nor the care of father would have been there. Good will of blood relations, games and toys of childhood, innocent bonding with childhood friends, none of these would have been there."

"Then the world would become a dull place Bhadant."

"Yes, so dull that love would become meaningless, parents would not desire children. And there would be no need for the coming of a new

generation. Men and women created an eternity ago would have lived till the end of the time. Neither I would have come nor you. And why just the eternal youth? Everything in this world would have to be eternal and unchanging."

"Unchanging!"

"Yes, why do you apply the law of changelessness just upon the youth? Change is the law of our universe, in your universe changelessness would become the law. Then there would be just one season- winter, summer or maybe just the rainy season."

"Then Bhante! Nothing new would ever happen in the world."

"Neither would there be any beauty left in the world; newness is the other name for beauty. It is newness that pleases our minds. Winter is followed by spring, new flowers and new leaves, chirping of birds among trees. All of this would be lost."

"But if the world was changeless we would never die."

"Are you scared of death son?"

"I do not fear my own death, but it would be painful to lose the people I love."

"That is the unpleasant aspect of death, but if there was no death, there would be no new life either. You shed tears for the dead but tell me how do you feel when you see new lives coming into this world, new faces, new limbs, new characters? Is it not a pleasing sight? Is it not a gain that more than makes up for the loss of the dead?"

"Even then Bhante, death is not nice."

"I too agree with that, death in itself is not pleasing, but if it was not there new life too would not have been there. Have you seen a river at its source? There its current is narrow and effete. But as it progresses, it becomes broader and stronger. Had the river refused to move ahead it would have remained narrow and effete and it is probable that lack of movement would have caused filth to accumulate in it."

"Yes I agree, it is its flow that keeps a river clean."

"This world is pleasing only because it is in constant motion; forever changing, flowing. If we were never hungry the pleasure of eating would be lost. Change is a constant, continuous process, happening all the while, everywhere, in the smallest of particles, even within you and me. Our mind, our conscience(antastal) change every moment. This is the law of the universe and it is not a bad law. Is Magadhi any less sweet than Sanskrit?"

"No Bhante! In fact I like it more, especially Bhasha and Soumila's poetry."

"So, change is not a bad thing. The law of change is immutable. If we can learn to welcome it, like the fresh blossom of mango, like the spring after winter then life would not seem sad or depressing. It is the law of change that gives us a sense of initiative. Nobody would need to do anything if the world was unchanging, our physical energy and intellect would become useless."

Acharya Vasubandhu was telling me all this in the context of change in languages. Then I did not know that this was in fact deep philosophy propounded and taught to the world by lord Buddha. After that whatever I saw only confirmed this law- everything in this world is subject to constant change. I saw Ashoka's courtroom, its construction was different from that of our times. I saw Mahabodhi Vajrasana's (Bodhgaya) stone gateway and the images of men and women engraved upon it. Women of those times did not wear the same kind of earrings as our women. Their necklaces were different. Women in our times wear bracelets and anklets, during the time of Ashoka they would completely cover their arms and legs with bangles. Clothes, head wear were all different; then women too wore turbans like men.

Acharya would teach us Mahakavi (great poet) Ashvaghosha's plays with a lot of enthusiasm. We loved reading 'Buddha-Charita' and 'Saundernanda' too. I had a good voice. Parambhattaraka (the emperor) was himself a skilled Veena player and a lover of music, therefore we would have music festivals in the palace on a regular basis. I loved music too and was then trying to master the art of playing the Veena. I was thirteen years' old then; one day I played the Veena and sang a beautiful song. The song was much appreciated in the royal palace. But I was not very happy about this uncalled for attention to my skills. I thought that if the Bhattaraka got to know he would ask me to sing everyday and my education with Acharya Vasubandhu would be disturbed. Acharya was a treasure trove of knowledge and I did not want to waste a moment's time. So, after that day I never played the Veena or sang for an audience, except of course when it consisted of a select group of close friends and Chandra. Meanwhile I had become the student of a well known music teacher to whom I would go on a regular basis to improve my knowledge of music and practice what I had already learnt.

I felt a natural fascination for sculpture and paintings both old and new. Bright colours of beautiful paintings attracted me. Ajjuka's attendent Chaturika was an outstanding painter. I would sit beside her for hours,

watching her create beauty out of nothing; she would stretch the canvas, put a coating upon it, dry it in the sun and then make sketches upon it with thin narrow lines. I could sit all day watching her fill the canvas with all sorts of dazzling colours. Chaturika had a fondness for me; not because I was Bhattini's brother but because she sensed genuine simplicity and sympathy in me. How do beautiful eyes emerge out of a white canvas? First a thin light red line, then its upper and lower parts, half budding or throbbing eyelids, eyelashes, pupils with a bright spot in the middle of it placed gracefully over a white background criss-crossed by minute webs of red blood vessels. At the time of painting she would get completely engrossed, losing sense of everything around her. There was no other place in the royal palace, except my apartments where she could work peacefully. None of her friends would come there to disturb her while she painted. At times, whenever I had an opportunity I would shower some words of praise for her artwork. Looking at her painting, I too would feel the urge to create something as beautiful, but doubted that my brush would be as deft as hers. I wanted to create something really nice worthy enough of catching her attention. With such thoughts in my mind I would visit artisans of various sorts to observe their artwork- Skilled carpenters creating flowers, climbers, statues out of wood, ivory workers carving patterns upon ivory, sculptors working their skills upon stone and clay. I decided to master at least one among these three art forms; then I would create something dazzling and amaze Chaturika. I secretly began to visit master craftsmen. Though my education with Acharya Vasubandhu was still my prime motivation, I did not spend the rest of my time playing games like Chandra did. Chandra was not very happy about my disappearances but soon he realized that I could be his companion only during certain specific hours of the day. So he began playing with Virasena who had become his close friend now. I started with wood work, then I switched to ivory and finally to sculpting stones which I began to like the most. There is nothing like the pleasure and pride one feels in being able to melt stone with one's fingers, as though it is wax and then unveiling it to the gaze of a genuine connoisseur. For almost four-five years I would be away, practising sculpture, but very few people got to know about this. I had advanced fairly well in this art when I heard about a Greek sculptor who could imitate a person's face ditto on stone. Mathura's sculptors were skilled too, they could carve folds in the clothes and various other minute details but all their idols were imaginary. It was beyond their ability to carve a living person's face on stone. So one day I went to see him. My Mathur sculpture master had come along too. There in his studio I saw a bust of Parambhattaraka that he was sculpting; though it was still half

complete I was stuck by the way he had carved the face; nose placed in perspective, rise and fall of the chin and the cheeks and eyes on a marble stone. If I could learn this, I would surely be able to make something to surprise Chaturika. It was not very difficult to become the Greek artist's disciple; though I did not give him my real introduction, he looked at some of my own work, my youth and enthusiasm and agreed to teach me. The Greek master taught me the art of imitating a live subject on wet clay; this was easily the most difficult part.The undulations of a face had to be imitated very finely on wet clay, adding a bit of earth here, removing a little from elsewhere with chisel in hand. My first model was that of a beggar; the Greek master liked it a lot and praised me for the progress I was making; I was very happy. Around that time Chaturika was busy making a painting about the spring and a virahini (a love struck woman waiting for her departed lover) on a big canvas. Engrossed in her work she would spend hours at my apartment. While she was at it, I began to capture her image on clay secretly, sitting behind a window so that she would not know what I was upto. Then one day the marble statue was ready and I got it placed in the living room, covered with a piece of cloth. I wanted to surprise her and was thinking of some way to do it when I remembered Kurbhak the hunchback. So I met him at the pleasure garden on a full moon night, still waiting for his wife.

I said- "So, the Apsara has not descended from the heaven yet?"

Kurbhak was not irritable with me because generally I was more sensitive towards him than the rest of the palace. He sighed and remained silent. I said- "Kurbhak, our fates are similar. The woman you loved disappeared in the sky and my lover turned into a lifeless marble statue."

Kurbhak got curious so I brought him to my residence. I showed him the marble statue and said- "She was an Apsara too, once we were in love, but now she is just a lifeless statue."

"Then my prince (Bhartridarak)! I am sure that like me you too cannot sleep at night."

"There is no sleep dear (Bhadra) Kurbhak! I have but one hope left that keeps me alive—if a beauty skilled in the art of painting touches this statue with her paintbrush, it will come back to life. Either this should happen or I too am condemned to stare at this stone statue for the rest of my life like you do at the sky on full moon nights." Having said this I made a face like I was about to cry. Kurbhak tried to console me and said, "Among the attendants of Bhattini, there are many who are skilled with the use of paintbrush."

"But I do not wish to become an object of ridicule by showing this statue to all the women in the palace who can paint."

"My prince! I understand your pain because I have faced ridicule myself."

"(Bhadra) Dear Kurbhak, please do not tell anyone about what I just told you. And sometime, when I am not here, please bring along the youngest and prettiest woman in the palace who can paint as well and somehow try and persuade her to touch this statue with a paintbrush. If you can do this, I will not forget this favour till my last breath."

The next day, as I entered the living room, I saw Chaturika standing next to the statue, staring at it intently and Kurbhak trying to somehow thrust a paintbrush into her hand and get her to touch it. Seeing me standing there, Kurbhak said, "My prince! please say something, she won't touch it."

I told Kurbhak that I would talk to her and somehow convinced him to leave us alone. Chaturika looked like she wanted to ask something. I knew what she would ask, so I said before she could speak anything- "A Greek artist brought this statue from across the seven seas, after a lot of haggling he somehow agreed to sell it to me for a thousand dinars."

For many days Chaturika did not suspect my story and thought it to be a statue bought for a thousand dinars but after some days her friends in the palace recognized the face of the statue. Chaturika then asked me where it had come from. I said "Please accept this statue as a token of gratitude for arousing the love for art in my heart. I made it for you but this must remain a secret between the two of us."

"But what do I say if people ask me about the artist who made it for me."

"Just tell them that one day you were sitting by the Ganges, seeking inspiration for your next painting when an artist secretly stole your face."

"But what if they ask your Greek master about it?"

"Do not worry about that, the Greek master has left Patliputra for good."

Though I had keen interest in music and sculpture, I never thought of either of these as a vocation for life. Most of my attention was focussed upon the education I was receiving from Acharya Vasubandhu. Acharya would often praise me for the progress I was making; this made ajjuka very happy. She wrote to father about it, who in turn expressed the desire to see me again.

The Royal Clan

Now we were fifteen years old. Though Chandra did not have much interest in music or sculpture, he loved literature. When Acharya taught us Ashvaghosha's plays- 'Sariputra Prakaran' and 'Rashtrapal Paripriccha', Chandra decided that we must enact at least one of these. He chose 'Rashtrapal-Paripriccha'; so then for months the royal household kept preparing sets and discussing the selection of characters. I said- "Brother (vayasya)! you be Rashtrapal."

"And the lead actress?"

"Would Chaturika be fine?"

"But if we take her it would be rather difficult for me to do justice to the character of an ascetic."

After many days of preparations the play was enacted at the palace of prince Chandragupta. Crown prince Ramagupta had been invited too. But ajjuka had not been informed, because Chandra had taken the liberty of making several modifications in the play so that it had a fair degree of eroticism now. I had been asked by Chandra to enact Rashtrapal, the ascetic. Chandra was being Rashtrapal's father, Chaturika the lead actress- Rashtrapal's wife and the rest of the roles had been distributed among other young boys and girls in the palace. Mahashresti's (great merchant) son Rashtrapal, having wandered afar as a mendicant Buddhist monk for many years, one day knocked the door of his own house for alms. His mother could not recognize him and irritated with the monk's attire said- "These monks are heartless people, they led my son astray." On being refused alms, Rashtrapal readied to move away, still wearing a serene smile on his face. Just then a slave girl appeared on the doorstep, about to throw away stale leftovers. Rashtrapal said- "Sister, if you are going to throw these away anyway then why not put them in my begging bowl." So the slave girl gave the leftovers to him. Rashtrapal settled down against the wall of the house and began to eat from his earthen begging bowl. The slave girl recognized Rashtrapal's voice and informed his father, who then came out to take a look at the monk. He recognized his son and begged him to come back home. I think, Chandragupta was by far a better actor to do justice to this character. Scared that I might make some mistake, my heart kept beating very fast all through the play. The last scene- Rashtrapal was invited for a meal the next day and he was served a number of delicacies in golden plates. His mother took out all her expensive jewellery and said to her daughter-in-law, "groom yourself in the manner he used to like, charm him with your beauty." In this new background and with all the make up, Chaturika was looking even more stunning than usual. She gave

Rashtrapala a coy look and asked "So how are those Apsaras for whom you practise such harsh penance?" Rashtrapal still undeterred from his asceticism said "Sister! I do not practise asceticism to win Apsaras."

My heart sank as I (being Rashtrapal) said these words. I thought then that I had fallen in love with Chaturika, even though I realized later that it was just infatuation. Though I do not think Chaturika gave much thought to what Rashtrapala, the character, had said to her. She was a royal attendant, meant to serve the king and the princes and they had full right upon her life and emotions. Somehow, the play ended and I heaved a sigh of relief. I had been so uncomfortable and restless enacting Chaturika's ascetic husband that I felt certain that I would make some mistake. Though the play had been a grand success,Chandra did not seem satisfied. He expressed his thoughts thus- "Jai! What can one say about these poets, one moment they create such superlative aesthetics and in the next blow it into smithereens. If the purpose of the play was to portray renunciation then why did they need to juxtapose it to such delicate and alluring aesthetics."

"I am in full agreement with you brother Chandra, asceticism must never be juxtaposed to aesthetics."

"In my opinion such an effort on part of a poet is internally contradictory. It is probable that their real intention is to portray eroticism and sensuousness and they somehow shove in themes of renunciation in their plays to hide their true motives."

"Or alternately it could be said that unless eroticism and sensuousness are shoved in, very few people would come to watch a bland portrayal of asceticism—renunciation.

Chandra had not enjoyed this play. He decided that now on he would enact only such plays which depicted revelry and hedonism and that he would play the lead character himself. Bhasa and Soumilla were suitable for the purpose. Chandra liked the play 'Charudutta' too; he played Charudutta himself.

Our adolescence ended. We were young men now.The royal palace bristled with feminine beauty. For the princes marriage was not a hindrance in the way of fulfilling sensual desires. Chandragupta had an independent palace of his own in which he kept dozens of ravishing beauties. Surrounded by real women, he did not need to read dull epic plays taught by Vasubandhu to get a feel of the sensuous aspects of life; wine and women had become his two main addictions. And Parambhattaraka was leading him on with his personal example. We would often joke about it. Chandra would say- "What has got into the old

man's mind? The royal palace is already full of thousands of women but his appetite for young damsels won't end; he is still bringing in virgins by hundreds."

"Monarchs (Paramabhattaraka) swear by practical religion- "So long as there is life, have as much fun as you can."

"Not a bad thing at all. One cannot be certain of being born a king in the next birth. None of these pleasures would be there if one were to face the misfortune of being born in a poor family or some other lower station in the next birth. I consider Kautilya my guru."

"Meaning that people who fear the gods or fret about their fates in the afterlife are fools?"

"Yes. But it is also true that excess of indulgence in pleasure might affect one's fate in this life itself. Don't you see father? He is so engrossed that now he can hardly spare time even for the state work." I do not like this. Great man Kautilya would have disliked it too."

"So brother Chandra, you are under the influence of Kautilya these days?"

"In my opinion, for a prince, there cannot be a better guide for life than Kautilya. He was the teacher of another Chandragupta who became a great emperor. This Chandragupta too, like his namesake from the past is ready to tread the path illuminated by the great master. His greatest wisdom is- 'worry about this world, the gods and the afterlife may go to hell.'"

"If you worried about the world then I too would stand by you. But master Kautilya says, 'worry about just one's personal self."

"Oneself and one's own blood relations."

"Do kings care about their blood relations? They pray for their father's death and once it happens fall upon their brothers to slaughter them."

"The throne demands sacrifices. Only those who prove their ability are worthy of wearing the crown."

"In that case, 'caring for the world', is just glib talk."

"Jai ! You may master all the logic Vasubandhu has taught if you like, but I have understood now—it's the sword that rules the world, logic is useless."

"Yes, I see that too, and I understand that you are working very hard to master the use of the sword."

"I will master the use of sword for sure; I do not want to bring shame to the name Chandragupta."

"But when I see you surround yourself with women and throw in goblets of wine even before the sunset, I begin to have doubts about that."

"Do not doubt me Jai! Chandragupta knows very well that women and the goblet come only to those who hold sharp weapons in their hands. There is a time for revelry and there is a time for work. Have you ever seen me in the arms of a woman or lying drunk when it is time for work?"

"But brother ! We are not even fifteen yet, so much revelry at such a tender age is bad both for the body and the mind."

"Good! So you are learning to preach too from Acharya Vasubandhu?"

"You can laugh at my advice Chandra but are you not aware that Pandu and so many other kings became impotent in their youth due to excessive indulgence."

"So you think that it is just Chandragupta upon whom the young women of the palace are swooning. Brother, royal palace is not a place meant for exercising restraint. The very air here is heavy with lust. Look at yourself ! Do you know what the young women say about you- 'Jai is young, handsome and strong but he lacks the courage to be with women.' Is it not a matter of shame that young women should think you to be impotent? Do you wish to become a monk?"

"To remain a Yaudheya is all I desire. In our republic we do not have a royal palace nor a harem, this prisonhouse of thousands of beauties."

"You call this a prison? Where else can these beauties enjoy such heavenly pleasures? These splendid palaces, these blissful gardens, orchards laden with fruits, fine clothes, jewellery, incense and perfumes! You think other ordinary women can enjoy such luxuries? I think you would not hesitate to call even Indra's heavenly abode a prison."

"If each one of these women had a companion of their own, probably I too would have called this place Indra's heavenly abode. But do you not know how much sleaze and agony is concealed by these white washed high walls of the royal palace. There is no escape for the women confined here-no safe haven from the persecution of the king and the society; so these poor creatures prefer to spend their lives here, in this grand prison."

"I feel astonished Jai! You share the same air, water and earth as I do, then how did you turn out to be so cruel? 'Cruel', I am repeating a word that I heard Chaturika for you. She had a lot of expectations from you."

"I would not say that I am not attracted towards women Chandra, but I think we are still too young to commit to someone. There would be a time for it, we have our entire lives ahead of us."

"But Chaturika has a lot of expectations from you. Why do you disappoint her?"

"Women in the palace need not remain disappointed because one man refuses to oblige them."

"Are you referring to these old wrinkled seventy years' old chamberlains?"

"In my opinion, being seventy years old does not make them as safe for the royal palace as we think them to be." But no, I was not referring to them."

"In that case you must be pointing at these dwarfs and hunchbacks! Ha! Ha! No woman in her senses would even so much as spit at them."

"Because no other men are here for them, I do not think that they can afford to spit upon even the dwarfs and the hunchbacks."

"But you live here too."

"Yes I live in this royal palace too, but my life and aspirations lie ahead of me, in the future that I have chosen for myself."

"Yes! That reminds me, Jai, do you ever think about your plans for future?"

"If I did not have any plans for future then why would I spend hours poring over old moth eaten manuscripts in the lamp light while you busy yourself in your revelries? At the moment I am accumulating knowledge, making myself resource rich. Making my body and intellect strong are my two important tasks for the time being."

"And then?"

"The picture is not clear yet but narrow self interest can certainly not become the guiding principle of my life."

"Ok brother! I will take leave now, it's time for my revelries."

Chandragupta then glanced at some young women standing at a distance; I could see Sanumati, daughter of Gopala, one of the top merchants in Patliputra among them.

I was a young man now. Gradually I was beginning to make sense of many of things that went on in the royal palace; things that I had accepted without a thought till then out of childish innocence. The royal palace was nothing less than an open school for the science of sensuousness and eroticism, so understanding what went on around me was not very difficult. It is not true that I had no attraction for women but somehow I sensed a strange artificiality and hollowness about them. I had been given a palace of my own, which unfortunately was very close to Chandra's

residence. At times women from the royal palace would come to run errands for ajjuka but sensing that I was not displaying much interest, they would not hang around for too long. Occasionally Chaturika would come too. I had never treated her harshly but for some reason she thought me to be cruel. I broached this issue once or twice but her replies did not strike as genuine to me. She would say- "Earlier when I would be engrossed in painting you would sit next to me; your touch thrilled my body but all I am left with now is this faint smile that I see on your face. I thank my fate for it but feel scared at the same time that like the moon on a dvitiya night, this smile too would disappear one day."

I put my hand on her shoulder and said- "Chaturika! This smile for you shall never disappear. I am still as eager to be close to you but you know how much time I have been devoting to my studies lately. Our Acharya is a source of limitless knowledge. He is old and a nomad by nature, therefore I want to learn as much as possible while he is still around."

"But you were studying earlier too. The truth is that you have drifted away from me."

"I do not know, you are older than me so you have more experience with these matters. I do not want to contradict you, but the matter of fact is that as I study more I realize that the realm of knowledge is a limitless ocean and I feel somewhat lost."

Chaturika did not say anything for some while, standing absentmindedly, as though unable to register what I had just said. Then she took a deep breath and said- "So you find me old, why don't you just say this in so many words. But you did not find me old then, when chisel in your hand you spent entire nights trying to carve my image into stone. Ok..."

I took her hand in my hand and said- "Pretty! One would have to be blind to call you old. You have youth, beauty and countless other virtues. I might have borrowed these words from an epic that I read, but they express true sentiments buried deep inside my heart. I hesitate because I know that it is impossible for me to keep my commitment towards you. I am not going to be here forever. One day, when I am ready, I would have to take wings for good. Would you want me to act in the same manner as the rest of the men in the palace do? Engage in a lifeless and lustful temporary relationship?"

"I do not think that it is so bad. I too was born and brought up at the royal palace."

"I had not expected such an answer, at least from Chaturika. I had always thought her to be different from rest of the women in the palace. Her reply hurt me but I did not want to be harsh to her so I forced a smile on my face and said- "If that is what you desire then so be it, but what is the hurry? Let me learn as much as possible from Acharya while I can and then we will have all the time in the world for us."

"But then you will take wings and I would be left here alone."

"Chaturika ! Let me tell you this, among all women in the palace, you are the only one towards whom I am drawn. If you too desire the same as the rest of the women here then be rest assured that I am not going to 'take wings' for a very long time."

"Chaturika brought her lips close to mine and said- "So do I deserve at least a kiss from your grace?"

I quietly bent my face down.

Chaturika left and probably she was happy now but there was a storm in my heart. I was quietly sitting on a chair, thinking. Kulupa noticed that I was troubled and said- "My prince, are you unwell? Why are you upset today?"

I tried unsuccessfully, to force a smile on my face and said- "No mother." Being attached to Kulupa, at some point of time during my childhood I had begun to call her mother. Later when I was given a palace of my own, I had asked ajjuka that Kulupa be given to me." Seeing that Kulupa was unconvinced, to change the topic I asked her- "Mother, do kings maintain such harems in your country as well?"

Kulupa took a deep breath and said- "My prince, in our Greek land we have no kings."

"So is your land a republic as well? Like Yaudheyas?"

"It was a republic once, then we had a king, and now we do not have a king of our own. Greeks have been subjugated by Romans."

"Hearing about the existence of a republic in Greece in the past aroused my curiosity. I had not ever heard of the presence of a republic outside Bharat. I said- "Mother! Can you tell me more about your republic?"

"Very long ago, I cannot tell how many ages have passed since then, I have heard from our elders that Alexander's father destroyed our republic and became the king himself."

"Alasander, Aliksunder!! The Greek conqueror who had entered Bharat's boundary?"

"Yes, I have heard that his empire extended from dawn to dusk."

"Acharya told me that slightly before Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta Maurya became the emperor of Magadha, Aliksunder had entered Bharat's boundaries and conquered Purushpur and Takshila. But then his soldiers lost courage and he could not conquer Udayachal and proceeded towards Mathura and Patliputra. He was a great conqueror, there is no doubt about this. After him, a number of Greek kings ruled over different parts of Bharat. But now there is no trace of either the empire conquered by him nor even of any of his descendents."

"Which empire can last forever? After Alexander, for a very long time our country was ruled by kings. I do not remember much about any of them. In our language there are numerous chronicles about our history, there are stories too but I can barely remember any of those now."

"Do you remember any story about your republic mother?"

"There is one which is unforgettable. Some Greek poet had written a play about it. A friend narrated it to me at Rome. It is a rather strange story; since then I have narrated it to people several times."

"But you never narrated this story to me mother! You narrated so many stories about monsters and ghosts but never this one."

"Because it is a women's story. So I narrate it only to women."

"If you do not mind it, can you tell this story to me as well, mother?"

"Why should I mind my prince? Listen then. This is a story from the time when Athens was the capital of the Greek republic. Athens is still a great city, the city goddess is called Athena. My girl was born there, so we named her Athena."

"So mother, there are goddesses in your country as well?"

"This was many years before I was born. Now Greeks and Romans are all followers of the religion of Christ. But Greek people's fortune had reached its zenith a long long time ago, much before Christianity was born, so modern Greeks still look upon the relics of their past with affection and deference."

"Ok, so what was the story? The women's story?"

"Yes, Athens was ruled by an assembly of the heads of families."

"The same happens in our republic too mother! Yaudheya republic too functions in the same manner."

"Such states still exist? I never knew about it my prince. Somehow I always presumed that Bhattini is some king's daughter."

"My father has served as the king and commander of the republic but among us these posts are given to a person elected by the assembly. Our kings are different from hereditary kings."

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"My father has served as the king and commander of the republic but among us these posts are given to a person elected by the assembly. Our kings are different from hereditary kings."

"That explains Bhattini's gentle and modest nature. And so are you my prince! Both of you are alike."

"Ok, Ok mother, Now tell the story."

"Athens was ruled by a republican assembly- only men could become members of this assembly. They would fight a lot, both amongst themselves and with other states. The women of Athens thought- 'these men are incapable of being good rulers, they keep fighting because they lack the sympathy and kindness of women. There can be peace and happiness in Athens only when women take over the task of ruling from men. So a plan was hatched. Men were in the habit of drinking and dancing late into the night till they passed out. One night when the men were fast asleep, the women of the city wore men's assembly gowns and entered the assembly hall. Guards posted at the assembly hall thought them to be assembly members and hence did not stop them. The women then formed an assembly, elected a chairperson and after a few deliberations passed a declaration which said that men are incapable of ruling so they are henceforth divested of the right to sit in the assembly; now on, only women would have the right to sit in the assembly. The declaration was put down in writing and hung outside the assembly hall and at the city square. The women then returned to their houses. The next morning men had difficulty in finding their assembly gowns. Finally when they reached the assembly hall, they were stopped outside by the guard. The members then read the declaration. Not only had men been divested of the right to participate in the assembly, but it had also been declared that henceforth all the farms, forests and houses would be considered the property of the republic. All citizens of the republic would be considered one family, every citizens would have to work as per his/her capabilities and the republic in return would ensure that all are provided with sufficient food, clothes and shelter."

This simple story made me think. The idea of a republican state was not new to me, but it had never crossed my mind that the entire property could be owned by the state. Among Yaudheyas, the republic owned all the farms but farming was not done collectively. Profits made through farming and trade were owned by individual families. This story had given me a lot of food for thought and I felt that I would have to contemplate over it deeply for many days before I could reach any firm conclusions. Though I was feeling very low due to Chaturika's behaviour listening to this story made me feel somewhat better. But I was yet to get the answer to my question about whether or not Greeks had harems. So I asked Kulupa again- "Mother, this was a very interesting story; did the women's republic last for somewhile?"

"That I do not know. Most probably this is just a story."

"Do Roman kings maintain harems? Do the kings there also have thousands of queens?"

"They do have palaces but kings can have only one queen, they are not allowed to marry more than one woman.Call it Romans' and Greeks' custom or religious belief, men, whether they are kings or commoners, are not allowed to marry more than one woman. If they hear of one man marrying several women, they would probably be as surprised as you would, if you heard that one woman has several husbands."

"This is a very good custom mother! This is what all of us ought to follow. What is this royal palace after all; a prison for thousands of women?"

"No, but thousands of women live in the royal palaces there too! True, only one as the queen but as slaves women, dancing girls, attendants, thousands live in the palace."

"Ok, people over there have managed, at least, to forbid the king from marrying more than one woman. Keeping thousands of women as slave girls, attendants is a result of the kings' possessing excessive wealth. Till the time one man has excessive wealth and others nothing, men and women would continue to be bought and sold. Mother, are slave men and women sold in the market there also?"

"Yes my prince! There too men and women are bought and sold as though they are beasts."

"Most of the women in the royal palace were not bought in the market as slaves but they become slavish for a different reason. If the king does not mind, they are free to leave and go wherever they like, but at the palace women become like creepers hanging from a tree, incapable of standing on their own feet."

"So the royal palace there must be the same as here, obsessed with eroticism. The king, the queen and the rest of the women, thinking about this one thing all the time."

"Because there is only one queen, the number of princes and princesses is lesser but in all the rest matter there's hardly any difference between here and there."

"Mother, please do not take offence, but I am curious about women in the royal palace there."

"Why should I take offence after a lifetime of service at the royal palaces my prince? Both at Rome and here at Pataliputra, in my youth I had to be ready at all times to fulfil the desires of my masters and when I grew slightly older I had to do the job of being the messenger between desirous

men and women. I never told you about this, but I know very well about how many women in the palace swoon over you, not just the chettis but even the queens. They do not feel ashamed in sharing the worst of their desires with me. In the royal palace, the curtain of shame and hesitation is flimsier than a spider's web."

"What! The queens as well? They are Bhattaraka's wives, I consider them my sisters."

"In the royal palace such considerations do not stretch beyond immediate blood relations and there is nothing surprising about it my prince! Think for once about what the situation is like- these women are blessed with health, youth and beauty. All the comforts in the world are available to them, kamadeva (the god of desire) is worshipped in the palace not just on the occasion of vasantotsava (spring festival) but day in and day out in the form of music-dance, alcohol etc. And in the midst of this, one man for thousands of women. Meaning that even if he is absolutely fair in treating every one of his wives equally, each of these woman can hope to be with him only once every three years. How can you expect the women in the palace to behave with modesty under such circumstances?"

"Mother! You are right, I should not blame these women for what they have become. Being born as women is the only crime that these poor creatures have committed. Fortune blessed them with beauty and good families but at the same time condemned them to lead inhuman lives in confinement, within the walls of this splendid prison. I feel, if the women at Athens had to overthrow the entire social order in order to be able to propose a one page declaration then the need to overthrow the social order is a thousand fold more pressing in our case."

"But can the social order be overthrown?"

"This is what we need to think about mother. Time is eternal, what seems impossible today might become possible tomorrow."

"My prince! At times I feel that your thoughts are far in advance of your tender age."

"You mean to say that it is funny to hear a child speak about changing the world."

"I did not say this to taunt you! In fact I keep singing your praises everywhere; whenever these lecherous women of the court speak ill of you for not showing any interest in them I tell them- Our prince is not like that at all; he is a lion among men! Go and blacken your faces with someone else! But nothing can help these silly women. However, Chaturika is not like them..."

"Oh mother! You don't have to be Chaturika's advocate now"

"I would say as much on her behalf that she never speaks ill of you, though it is true that she thinks you to be cruel."

"What cruelty are you talking about mother? If I start reciprocating everybody's affection then there would be little left for me to do than running after every woman in the court. And Chaturika managed to squeeze a kiss out of me today, probably she would not call me cruel now. I respect love, but I do not see a place for it in this society. I have begun to understand love only recently, but it really angers me to see how close humanity has drifted today to animality."

"You are right my prince! Court women like us, whether at Rome or elsewhere are treated as little more than animals. With us they behave in the same shameless manner as they would with a tied animal. Not for a moment do they stop to think that these are in fact humans who are watching us behave like animals."

Probably Kulupa had begun to think of me as a super human of some sort, so I said- "I am no super human, neither do I desire to be one, but I am human for sure and I despise sinking to the level of animals. I abhor dual morality. A saint with clothes on and an animal with clothes off ! I cannot accept this. Is it not true that these same women whose tales you are narrating are seen at temples and other religious places pretending to be devout wives and saints? What's the use for this shallow pretence."

"They fear the afterworld and the fire of hell. They think that through penance-worship they can wash off some of the sins they have committed."

"The fear of hell and afterlife can instill morality among people! I have never seen a person acting morally due to the fear of God. Your experience is far more vast than mine mother! You have lived among the Greeks, the Romans and spent many years at Patliputra as well. You tell me- Have you ever seen people, especially the kings-lords and rich merchants behave morally because they were afraid of the hell and the afterworld?"

"No my prince, I have not ! Forget about merchant princes and kings-lords but even those who are thought to be saintly, who claim a special insight into the mysteries of afterlife and hell, deliver long sermons about the glory of God, shed tears in His praise and in the process make thousands cry along with them. I have seen them also behaving like animals. I was deflowered by one such saint. First he professed love for me and then, when I got pregnant, he got me sent to Athens. But apparently even this was not enough for him. To be rest assured that he had rid himself of his sin (me) he had me sent to this country on the pretence that I was being taken for a pilgrimage."

"It is the same here as well mother! For those who rule the masses-kings-lords, merchant kings etc, hell-afterlife are little more than fairy tales meant to scare small children. I despise their dual morality. According to me, there are at least two minimum criteria for judging whether morality is real or not- Firstly, it should remain constant, morality cannot vary as per what seems convenient, secondly it should be within human capacity.

I had often heard praise for Greek philosophers from Acharya. He had also told me that sometime in the distant past Greeks had come to India and settled down here. While reading 'Milinda Prashna' I had learnt about the deeply philosophical questions that the Greek king Menander (Milinda) had posed to Acharya Nagasena and it was also then that I had got to know that Shakala (Sialkot) had served as the capital of Milinda's empire. But I had not known that ancient Greeks had republics, that they worshipped gods and goddesses and that they later converted to Christianity. Whenever I could spare some time, I would ask Kulupa numerous questions about the Greeks and the Romans. Because of my gentle and sympathetic behaviour Kulupa would tell me all she knew without hesitating. But there was one distressing thought which haunted me repeatedly- The Greek republic was destroyed by a king and now all Greeks have been subjugated by Romans.

Last Meeting with Father

Father had been writing several letters to me. He was eager to meet me and wanted ajjuka to come along for a visit as well. It was almost the end of winter when I reached Agrodka with ajjuka and Chandra. Though I was hardly sixteen yet, due to my family inheritance and regular exercise I already looked like a strong young man of twenty. Father seemed to have aged in the past two years. And he had many worries, not about himself or me but about the Yaudheya republic. Though Parambhattarak had never interfered with the internal matters of the republic and whatever little revenue he claimed from it was generally returned in the form of gifts and grants. The real reason for worry was that Yaudheyas had begun to lose the spirit of the republic. Though individual accumulation of wealth in the form of land was not possible due to our strict laws, many were growing rich through commerce. Now the youth did not seem to care much for learning the use of weapons and arts of war. Accumulating as much gold as possible and building a palatial mansion seemed to have become their primary preoccupations now. They would visit Mathura. Being from the head queen's clan, the viceroy there would welcome them

lavishly. Red wine served in golden goblets, dancing girls at the viceroy's palace, royal official's expensive clothes and grand palaces seemed to hold them in thrall. They wanted to imitate the same in the Yaudheya land. Father had grown very apprehensive of this new development. Chandra spent most of his time hunting or music-dancing with his numerous doting aunts. My sister-in-laws (Bhabhis) wanted to drag me as well, but I spent most of my time with Father. He had a lot of knowledge about the Yaudheyas' history, their tales of courage and their ancient religion. Now that I was older, I was as much eager to listen as he was to pass on to me everything he knew. Often we would have conversations till the middle of the night. One day I asked- "We are called Yaudheyas as well as Agreya, why do we have two names?"

"Father said- "Within the Yaudheya republic there are numerous clans and sub-republics; Agreya, Rohitki, Khandilya etc being some among them. Many centuries ago these sub-republics were small independent republics and they had their own assemblies and currencies (karshapana). There were hardly any fights between these republics. But then gradually monarchies came up towards our east and west. They coveted our fertile land, green fields and healthy cattle and began to attack us. It became clear to us that small republics cannot defend themselves on their own. So the chosen leaders from all republics sat together to deliberate and finally it was decided that Yaudheyas and other small republics must merge to form a bigger and stronger republic." Our ferocity in the battles earned us our name Yaudheya ('the warlike'). Four hundred years have passed since this republic was formed. Malavas chose not to merge and decided to fight on their own. But faced with armies raised by emperors ruling over half the subcontinent, they could not last for too long. So you can see that today they have moved further south from our boundary.They are a brave people and they loved their motherland as much as we do but faced with the danger of being wiped out, they were forced to leave their ancestral lands and migrate. The land lying to our west, on the bank of Satadru was once Malava homeland."

"How did we come to possess Malavas' land?"

"Monarchies are established by individuals and so their power remains confined to small families. And within such families brothers, fathers and sons do not hesitate from shedding each other's blood to become the emperor; the reason why monarchies are never long lasting. On the contrary republics survive for centuries and are relatively more difficult to dismember or subdue. Mauryas conquered lands upto beyond Purushpura but they dismembered very few republics, except for some

near Takshila. Like Samudragupta, Chandragupta Maurya too was in favour of leaving the republics free in governing their internal matters but on the condition that they must extend support in fighting off foreign invaders. After the decline of Mauryas their vast empire was divided up among a number of smaller kings who now became a threat for the existence of republics. Greek king Milinda and his successors waged a number of wars against the republics of Uttarapatha. They fought bravely but were defeated and forced to migrate. Some of them came and merged themselves with our republic, they are Yaudheyas now. Though these republics of Uttarapatha were defeated, they helped us survive by blunting the force of the first wave of attacks from the Greeks. I do not think that we would have survived either had us been exposed to the first wave. Threat to our survival reappeared with the invasion of Kushanas from the west, but now we had managed to forge a unified republic, much bigger and stronger. Our vast organization, combined with our bravery and fearlessness had multiplied our strength manifolds. Empires rise up and scatter like the storm cloud, it is difficult for them to maintain their power for even a generation or two but republics are far more long lasting. From this wisdom and the experience of our ancestors we have learnt that if an empire does not insist upon wiping out our very existence then there is no harm in making an honourable compromise with it; our ancestors had a similar understanding with the Mauryas as we have with the Guptas. Faced with the Kushana storm too, we had worked out a similar solution. Kushanas wisely decided not to be too greedy, they knew how strong our blades are. And besides, we had by now managed to unify within our republic not just the Yaudheya sub-republics but also Kunindas, who live between Satadru and Vipash (Beas) river and the Arjunayans who inhabit the lands to our south; we were a much bigger and stronger entity now."

"Then why do we not invite Malavas too, to join our republic? As you said, they are brave warriors."

"That is because now there are a number of rich men among them who bear a lot of influence upon the republican government. They do not let Malavas merge with us due to their selfish interests. Without doubt Malavas are a brave people. Three hundred and nine years ago they delivered a crushing blow upon Kushanas; to mark the occasion they started a new calendar called the Malava samvat (Vikram samvat). Slightly more than a couple of hundred years ago Avanti-Saurashtra's Mahakshtrap Rudradaman took a vow to destroy Yaudheyas. Of course he did not succeed but we could not deliver the kind of defeat upon him as the Malavas had inflicted upon Kushanas. If Malavas, instead of going it alone, had chosen to join our republic we could have made Rudradaman grovel to us for

mercy. But one positive outcome of Rudradaman's invasion is that today Kunindas, Yaudheyas and Arjunayanas are ready to take on any enemy together, under the leadership of one commander."

"Are we still in possession of the entire land inhabited by our ancestors?"

"Yes, in fact we have managed to add some more land to what we originally possessed. Whenever our neighbouring kingdoms weakened or dissipated away, we would take over some of their land lying abandoned or deserted."

"But I have a question father. Kushana rule in Magadha was put to an end by Samudragupta's mother's clan, the Licchavis. It is not even fifty year since Magadha ceased to be a province of the Kushana empire. Today Yaudheya land extends up to the foothills of the Himalayas and Khaltika (Kalsi); how did it become possible for the Kushana armies to march up to Magadha without wresting at least some of our land?"

"Did I not tell you? When faced with a mighty enemy we choose to make a compromise. We allowed Kushanas a corridor for their armies through Strughan (Ambala) and the areas to the north of it. And later it was Yaudheyas' steady blows which gradually pushed Kushanas out of Madhyadesha. This feat was not a result of either Samudragupta's father's or Licchavi's campaigns, as the Gupta's are now trying to claim.Unlike monarchies, republics dislike pursuing mindless wars of conquests and getting thousands of their kins slaughtered so that one family may enjoy the fruits of victories; having forced Kushanas beyond Vipasha and south Satadru we let them be. But Kushanas still believed themselves to be unsafe, so they approached the Shahenshah of Persia to seek his patronage and gifted their kingdom to him in return. We do not consider Kushanas and Kshatrapas foreigners anymore. They might have come from outside five hundred years back but having lived here for such a long time they have become very much our own. Kushana Devaputra's cowardly submission to the Persians is a shameful act."

"Having listened to Yaudheyas' history from father, I expressed my fears about our future to him. He said "You are right son! Monarchy and republic are each other's sworn enemies. Republics inculcate self esteem and self confidence among each one of its citizens whereas monarchies seek to transform their subjects into herds of sheep."

"But this is not right father! Reducing humans to sheep is not in the interest of humanity. But why does this system based on injustice prevail everywhere?"

"Why does it prevail everywhere? You mean to ask, how does it become possible for one man to enslave others? Because, kings can gather armies manifolds bigger than any republic can."

"So, that means injustice weighs heavier than justice in this world."

"Letting oneself remain weak is a worse sin; it allows injustice to prevail. This is the sin that causes nations to become enslaved."

"Father! I heard from a Greek woman that earlier Greeks had a republic and their capital was Athens. Like us, Greeks too ruled themselves through an assembly. Aliksunder's father dismantled the republic and established his monarchy instead. Now Greeks have been under the subjugation of Romans for many centuries. The thought that the same might happen to us makes me very anxious."

"Anxiety is natural, but till the time Yaudheya's are capable of wielding swords, stay united and do not hesitate from embracing death for the republic we need not worry. But now there is a reason to feel anxious; our unity is endangered."

"Why is it endangered father?"

"Excessive love for dinars (gold coins) is causing rifts in our society. Dressed like kings, some rich Yaudheyas have begun to look upon themselves as superior to the rest. Such attitude is breeding jealousy among us. If twenty years of exposure to Samudragupta's empire has led to such results then one cannot but feel apprehensive about what the future has in store for us. These developments are a cause for grave concern."

"Father, I have observed, kings and emperors have an unending appetite for luxury and vain display of wealth; an addiction that impels them to gather as much wealth as they can. Maintaining such vain pomp and show necessitates that they plunder their subjects and when that does not suffice, their neighbours; therefore our rich lands cannot remain safe for too long. Ramagupta is a simpleton and it is possible that when he succeeds Samudragupta he will continue his father's policies. But father, I am very apprehensive about whether he would be able to retain his crown for too long."

"Why do you say this son?"

"Chandragupta is extremely clever and headstrong. He never discusses with anyone the dark ambitions he is nurturing in his mind. He considers Chandragupta Maurya and Vishnugupta his guiding philosophers in politics."

"This surely is a cause for apprehension son. But guiding Chandragupta towards the right path is beyond our capacity. He can never become a

supporter of our republic. But, if we keep our republic strong, we can keep his darker ambitions under check."

"I have similar thoughts. I often think about ways to make our republic stronger. Acharya Vasubandhu tells me a lot of things about the Licchavi republic. He tells me that the lord organized the bhikkhu-sangha in the same manner as the Licchavis organized their republic. Tathagata preferred republics to monarchy. In fact he was himself born in a republic. Yes, there is something that I wanted to ask you."

"Ask son."

"There are many rules for the organization of the Bhikshu-Sangha, but these are passed on through the word of mouth only to those who become monks themselves. I wish to learn these rules and, therefore, perhaps I would have to become a monk myself."

Father somewhat dismayed at hearing this said "No son! You must not become a monk. You are my only son. I and Yaudheyas have a lot of expectations from you."

"I would not become a monk to renounce the world or because I desire nirvana; be rest assured father. The only reason I am doing so is to equip myself better to serve Yaudheyas."

"If that is the case then I have no objections."

"I have read in Buddha's sermons that he wanted to remove all sorts of hierarchies and differences so that all may live in the sangha as one people. At Ashokaram there are monks of Greek, Persian, Shaka, Magadh, Vaidharbha, Sinhalese, Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishaya and Shudra origin. Within the sangha there are no differences among monks of different origins except for the order in which they joined the sangha. Sometimes, I wonder why the same cannot happen within our republic."

"Buddhists and Jains hold their sangha supreme. For both there is no supreme entity, like Gupta's Vishnu, who looks after the world. This is why in my opinion Shramana religion is better suited for a republic than brahmins' religion. If all races and castes settled within the Yaudheya land are given rights equal to us in the running of the republic then undoubtedly our strength would grow manifolds."

"Under present circumstances such an experiment cannot succeed. Our republic has always been based upon relations of blood. This has been so since the ancient times; changing it would not be easy. Apart from this, the rich among us possess numerous slaves bought in the market, they have numerous hired hands who work on their fields and craftsmen too hold a status not much better to these hired hands.These affluent people would never accept equal status for their slaves and servants, they would

say- 'these people want to hand over our republic to enemies. Yaudheyas do not constitute even half of the population in the Yaudheya land, these people desire that our republic should be controlled by non-Yaudheyas.' Such arguments posed by these selfish people would break our unity. I guess you understand that circumstances are not favorable to risk infighting."

"Yaudheyas' pride over their purity of blood is a hinderance for this project, I understand as much but perhaps there is no other way to make the republic stronger."

"Under the present circumstances, what you propose would only weaken the republic by creating dissensions within. May be there will be a time, sometime in future when it becomes possible."

Whenever I get an opportunity to listen-read about sanghas and republics I do so with rapt attention, and then contemplate over it deeply. I am very curious to learn whatever I can from other republics of the world and then strengthen our own with the lessons learnt."

During this visit, ajjuka visited Khandila, Bhadra, Prithudaka (Pehwar), Rohitki etc cities as well. Because she was going, I was also expected to give her company, though it is true that I too was eager to catch up with my friends and relations scattered at various Yaudheya settlements. Chandra was too busy in hunting, drinking and dancing, so he did not join us.

At other cities too I noticed the same trend towards rising differences among Yaudheyas, between those who had accumulated wealth recently and the rest who were not as affluent. Ajjuka and me were extended cordial welcomes wherever we went. My cousin brother's in-laws lived at Rohitki. Bhabhi (sister-in-law) Sunanda lived there too. She was very fond of me. Whenever people gathered to dance, she would pair up with me; later praising my skills at singing and dancing to whomsoever would care to listen to her. Visiting Rohitki was hard work, during the six days I spent there, everyday I had to dance six-seven hours with many different young women. At time we held Raas, in which ten-fifteen couples danced together. Sunanda's younger sister was a strongly built young woman; she was almost the same age as me. Though she could not tire me in dancing, Nanda would always be on the look out to somehow prove that I was a delicate little boy from the royal palace at Patliputra. Yaudheya youth can drink a pot full of milk at one go, at times they compete with each other in drinking milk. For someone like me, who grew up at the royal palace at Patliputra this feat was not easy but whenever I visited the Yaudheya land, I tried to imitate the youth there. One day a prank was planned and I was sent to the room where milk pots were kept to fetch more milk. There I found

Nanda standing at the door step. Blocking the door, she said in a challenging tone "Either remove me from the door, or wriggles through my legs." I tried coaxing-begging but she would not budge. She was proud of her strength and so was I, but it did not seem right to test my brawn upon a woman. Nanda- "So you look down upon me because I am a woman?"

"No Nanda! I do not look down upon women."

"You have no place for women in your heart, I know this."

I got down on my knees and said with folded hands "My goddess, I am ready to let my heart be your abode, but please do not ask me to test my brawn upon you."

"No need to act so dramatic Jai! Sister Sunanda tells me that you are very cruel."

"Bhabhi Sunanda has such opinions about me! I am very hurt. Tell me Nanda, do I ever refuse to dance with you or any other lady here? You almost had me dead, making me dance all night, did I ever say no to any one of you."

"That was due to your pride, you do not like to lose."

"So you want me to lose to you Nanda! In that case I concede defeat without fighting."

"Then rub your nose on the floor and wriggle into the room through my legs."

"I am ready to rub my nose at your feet a hundred times if you ask for it pretty! But the second condition is unbecoming of a lady like you."

"Forget about these proprietaries. Either accept Nanda's conditions or go back to your friends empty handed and be their object of ridicule."

"So you want me to wrestle with you? But this is not the right place for it, neither are you appropriately dressed for a wrestling-match"

"Nice try! You are hoping that I go to change so that you can weasel out. Place and dress do not matter."

"I will not run away. Won't you trust a Yaudheya's words."

"I do not trust anyone."

"She was not giving me any room to negotiate. I could hear sniggers from behind the door and sense a number of amused eyes watching my encounter with Nanda. I tried again "Ok Nanda, there is one thing that we can do, put some heavy objects on the floor. Whosoever is able to lift more weight wins."

"No, donkeys lift weights."

"Ok let me put my clenched fist before you. If you can unclench it you win."

"Umm, Ok. This seems like a good contest." Phew...she finally agreed to something."

So I clenched my left fist and held it out to her. Her red lips got redder with the effort she was putting but despite that she said "Sunanda was right. You think women to be inferior, that is why you are holding out your left fist to me."

I laughed and put my right fist forward instead. She was trying desperately, using both her hands but I was holding my fist tight. After some moments of effort droplets of sweat appeared on her brow and her beautiful long hair began to fall on her cheeks. I would remove her hair from her face and egg her on. This would irritate her and she would try harder. By now a crowd had gathered to watch what was going on. I said- "Dear Nanda, see how they have managed to turn us into a spectacle. Let's not let make fools out of us anymore, I am ready to surrender to you this very moment.

Poor girl, it did not take her long to realize that it was impossible to prise open my iron like grip. Soon she got drenched in sweat but wouldn't give up trying, her face was going red due to exertion and embarrassment. Being a brave daughter of the Yaudheya republic she couldn't have conceded defeat either. Just then Sunanda arrived. She saw Nanda's predicament and said- "Nanda! Can't you see through their tricks? Because they see you dance with Jai so much, they played this prank on you,so let it be. And if you are rest assured now that Jai is true Yaudheya then let me bring you a Jai mala, let's get the two of you married.

Nanda got embarrassed and let go and got up. I too got up and tidying up her disheveled hair said- "So I guess I am allowed to take the pot of milk now."

Sunanda- "You are proclaiming your victory Jai!"

I went down on my knees and said- "Not at all Sunanda bhabhi, victory is yours, I just want milk."

"I guess you think that daughters of Rohitki are delicate flowers."

"Only a naive man could think so. I have always been your humble slave."

Sunanda smiled and said- "Look at him, did he learn to talk like that from the princelings? You may take the milk but in the evening you will have to join us for our drinks party."

"Have I ever refused any of you invitations?"

"You haven't but you will have to drink tonight, like last time we won't let you sit all evening with one peg of booze in your hand."

"So you want to get me drunk like a demon?"

"You have come to your in-laws Jai! Let the young damsels of Rohitki make full use of this rare opportunity."

We had the milk. In the evening, I had to go to the girls' drinking party alone. I knew that Nanda and her friends would try their best to get me drunk, so I had to be careful. I raised my full goblet and said to the girl sitting next to me- "Pretty! Drink a sip from my glass and make it divine."

A lot of them were willing to oblige my humble requests. In some while as the gathering began to get drunk huge quantities began to be consumed, whereas I was careful to drink as less as possible. After sometime I began to sing Saumilla's poetry about the beauty of women. This helped me a great a deal in avoiding any more drinks, I would have a sip and then hand over my goblet to Nanda or some other girl. Towards the end I pretended to be so drunk that I couldn't keep my voice steady anymore. Some of them laughed about how drunk I was. When the time for me to leave came, I laughed triumphantly and sang in sober voice to proclaim that their design to get me drunk had failed. But by then everyone was so drunk that nobody noticed what I said or did."

Our Journey to the Himalayas

I had seen the Himalayas earlier from a distance. Acharya would often talk about the beauty of its verdant Deodar forests and the simplicity of the people who live among the mountains. I decided to see it for myself and asked Chandra to come along. He agreed readily, Chandra would always agree to such things. Ajjuka gave her permission and father too encouraged us. We said goodbye to ajjuka at Indraprastha; she took a boat to Patliputra. Then we left for the Himalayas on horsebacks. We proceed ahead from Strughan by the western bank of Yamuna. This route was heavily forested but we had the company of a caravan of merchants. Spread out for miles from the foothills of Himalayas, these dense forests are inhabited by numerous wild beasts like tigers, rhinos and elephants but for now we did not consider stopping to hunt. After many days of travelling we crossed the small hillocks of Sapadlaksha (Shivalik) to reach the city of Khaltika (Kalsi) located at the edge of the Himalayan range. When we reached this city was very crowded. Merchants from distant lands like Panchala, Antervedi, Yaudheya, Strughan etc had arrived with their horses, mules and oxen. It was the annual trading season for the hill people who had

descended from the mountains with their merchandize, carrying them on the backs of mountain goats and sheep. Mountain folks mostly wore woollen cloaks which resembled somewhat the attire worn by the Shakas. Their cloaks generally did not have stitches.They tied the ends of it with iron nails. Women too wear woollen saris, but these saris look more like cloaks tied with iron nails, in a manner similar to men. Mountain people do not like to bathe, their bodies and clothes are generally so dirty that there is a constant stink about them. Merchants have invented a number of artifices to fleece these simple folks. When Khaltika was a part of the Yaudheya republic, laws had been passed to regulate this trade and protect them. But later it passed into the hands of Devaputra Shahis and now it is in the hands of Samudra Gupta so that these cunning merchants are having a field day with the simple hill people. They do not even know to count so it is hardly surprising that they are tricked while transacting in coins. Merchants have devised another way to fool them. Expensive red wine is served to them and in return they give away their goods at throw away prices.

Khaltika is situated on the southern bank of Yamuna. It is at this point that Yamuna descends from the mountain, so it is sometimes also referred to as the doorway to Yamuna (Yamuna-Dvar). There is an Ashokan inscription here too, it seems that Khaltika has been an important commercial centre for many centuries. Khaltika's Kumaramatya welcomed the prince and his uncle very lavishly, in fact he managed to create a small scale royal court in our honour. Several local dignitaries arrived to offer salutations and gifts. We informed Kumaramatya of our intention to visit the Himalayas. He said- "I haven't been too far into the mountains myself but hill people are known to be very simple and honest and there is no threat of robbery or thievery on the way. But the roads are very difficult, mostly dirt paths- only mountain goats and sheep can climb them, and yes the mountain folks too climb them with ease. But there is no fear of dangerous wild beasts. After four-five days of climb weather becomes cool like the winters of the plains. Dear prince! A three-fours days journey would be easy to arrange for but if you intend to travel for longer then you might have to face scarcity of food."

I said- "But surely mountain people eating something!"

"Yes, but their food is hardly edible, forest herbs, meat and barley flour is their usual meal. Most of the times they do not even add salt to it."

Chandra Gupta said- "In that case Amatya we can survive on it too. We can roast the meat on fire or boil it and we may carry a lot of salt and of course some dinars for occasional purchases."

"Dinar would not help, they do not have so much money. You will have to carry coins of lower denominations like Pana, Padak and Mashak etc. But please do not worry about it, I will write to the mountain lords and village headmen right away."

I said- "Chandra, I think we would rather not travel like royalty. You don't want an entire army to march along, do you? If we travel with too many attendants the villages hosting us would be inconvenienced. I hope there are villages up there?"

Amatya said- "There are for sure, but they are very few and far in between."

"In that case Amatya we would need four-five men and a good pathfinder. Also you must write to a few village headmen and lords."

"I will take care of that but which way do you intend to proceed?"

"We would like to head towards Utsav Sanket and witness the Himalayan beauty at its best."

"Utsav Sanket begins from the very first village ahead of us and then the entire stretch for the distance of next ten-fifteen days falls within it. But that is a different country, you come across villages with four-six houses at the distances of an entire day, though lords' villages are generally slightly bigger."

There wasn't much at Khaltika for us to see. The same mountain people with their soiled clothes and herds of goats and sheep laden with sacks. Kumaramatya deputed a man called Vijjak as our pathfinder. Though he had been born among the mountains, for the past few years Vijjak had been serving the Kumaramatya and he understood our customs well. He seemed used to taking baths too. Upon being asked he said- "Yes we could carry our goods on goat-sheep backs but then our progress would be very slow and we may not be able to move more than 10-13 kilometers a day."

So we decided to take along five men to carry our luggage. Vijjak had warned us that we would be passing through very cold terrain and so we must carry along plenty of warm clothes. So we bought long cloaks, warm vests, caps and strong knee length boots. Among edibles we were careful to pack plenty of salt.

And so one day we set out on our journey with seven men to give us company and carry our luggage. Though we had climbed a small mountain to reach Khaltika, that was nothing in comparison to the steep climb that lay ahead of us. The first day our legs began to ache within three hours of starting our climb and our mouths were perpetually parched due to thirst. Both of us were in good shape due to our habit of regular exercise and long

dancing sessions, but this climb was proving to be so taxing that even though we managed to reach our first village much before sunset, every part of our bodies was aching. We hadn't covered anymore than 12 miles through the day's walk, halting to rest far more frequently than we had originally intended. The mountains around us were covered from top to bottom with verdant forests, tall trees with thick layers of vines wrapped around them. Hundreds of types of brightly coloured beautiful birds presented such sights as I had never seen before. The atmosphere all around us was abuzz with the collective chirping of birds and crickets. There were numerous waterfalls with cool running water, but Vijjak had warned us in advance that drinking cold water while climbing could prove fatal. So despite being parched with thirst, we had no choice but to sit quietly by the side of the streams and cool off before we could drink water. Vijjak knew about all the villages in this area, he had even been to the land of huge lakes beyond the mountains, so we were rest assured that we would not get lost. We had given him strict instruction not to reveal our real identities to anyone. He was supposed to say to everyone that we were the distant relatives of Kumara Amatya, though himself he knew very well who we were.

Twelve miles isn't even half a days journey but we had reached our first destination, a village, slightly before the sunset. Since we were already exhausted, we decided to call it a day and rest here. Vijjak had already sent four burden carriers ahead of us.

This first village was a fairly big settlement of around a hundred households, situated in a flat valley by the river-bank. Back on the plains, the headman of a settlement of this size would have been referred to as 'Gramik', but here he was called 'Raja' (king). He paid an annual tribute to the emperor of Magadh in the form of various mountain and forest products, and in return he was allowed to be the ruler of this big settlement and the entire stretch up to thirty miles up mountain from here. When we arrived, he came up to the main entrance of the village to welcome us. His attire did not look anything like his fellow mountain men, it look more like the kind Shakas' wore and also seemed to be influenced to an extent by that of the Guptas. His big house doubled up as his castle. Its walls were built out of big and small rocks and the ceiling was made out of wood. In fact a lot of wood work had been done to decorate the house. Two very neat and clean rooms had been prepared for us. As soon as we settled down, steaming water was brought in- this was Vijjak's arrangement. Vijjak washed our feet with it and asked us to lie down on our beds. Because we were so tired, we weren't feeling like eating right away so he asked him to let us be in our rooms for some time.

I lied down and began to observe the wooden vaults of the ceiling and the wooden floor. I was lying on a bed and then I did not realize that its presence there was a result of the influence of the plains. After some moments passed I saw a young damsel enter the room holding oil in a wooden bowl. She was wearing washed clothes and her body seemed cleaner than most of the mountain people I had come across so far, two neatly tied plaits were hanging on both her shoulders. Just a glance at her convinced me that she was an unusually pretty young woman. She bent her head to bow to me and began to rub oil over my legs. All of this happened so fast that I did not get the chance to say anything to her. And when she began to massage my feet, I felt so comforted that I did not feel like asking her to stop. I cannot say for how long she kept massaging my feet. Tired as I was, I quickly fell asleep. I woke up to see Vijjak massaging my legs to try and wake me up. It was already dark by now, a flickering four cornered lamp had been placed in the room. Seeing we awake, Vijjak said- "Dear prince! The dinner is ready."

I would have asked about the damsel but having just woken up from sleep, my mind was blank for the time being. So I got up and followed Vijjak mechanically. Chandra was already there. The king had got prepared a variety of meat dishes, fragrant Basmati rice and soups. As a vassal of the empire he visited Kumaramatya's court frequently, so it was hardly surprising that he had adopted a variety of Magadhan dishes. Some fine wine had been placed too. Chandra seemed completely rejuvenated by now but I was still somewhat drowsy. Eating-drinking went on till late into the night. When I got up to return to my room, Chandra followed me. "What's up?" I asked him.

"I am feeling completely refreshed now. How about you Jai?"

"Are you? I am still feeling somewhat tired."

"Why? Wasn't the medicine for exhaustion sent to you."

"Yes someone was sent to massage my legs; ya you are right, it brought a lot of relief."

"Jai! I do not believe you!"

"Sorry? What!"

"You are such a simpleton Jai. The damsels had been sent to comfort us."

"Is that so? Wow! You wouldn't miss the royal palace, good for you."

"That's my good fortune I guess. But your lady luck keeps eluding you as usual."

"Why do you say that Jai?"

"Could you at least strike a conversation with her."

"Not really. The massage put me to such deep sleep that I was slightly drowsy even while we were eating."

"I guess I need to educate you Jai, she had been sent to serve us. This is Utsav Sanket, it's a tradition among people here to offer their virgins to honoured guests along with food and drinks. In case there is no virgin in the house, some other young woman is offered. Without this crucial component, hospitality is considered incomplete among them."

"I am sorry, I do not understand you."

"Actually it is not very different from what is practiced back home. There guests are entertained with female attendants or slave girls, and here they send women from their own household."

"And how do you know all this?"

"Like you, I was tired too. When the damsel entered my room I asked her to stay and went to see Vijjak. He informed me that they are in fact the two daughters of the king and both are unmarried. Mountain people consider it their duty to serve honoured guests in this manner."

"And then?"

"And then? Her touch cured my exhaustion, every part of my body that she touched was relieved of pain."

"You are..."

"A fallen creature. Right? What wrong did I do? I was merely exercising a right borne by every guest in the Utsav Sanket."

"A right it may be, but it ought to be exercised only by the denizens of Utsav Sanket."

"And pray tell why should outsiders remain deprived?"

"Because our hearts are more cunning and petty. Mountain dwellers, unlike us, are a very simple people. Like eating and drinking they have pure thoughts about male-female bonding too, but when we see such practices our minds make us think of their women as prostitutes. A prostitute is forced to sell her body for a living, but here they are not sent to guests to make money. And because this custom is prevalent throughout this country it is not considered an act of generosity on part of the giver nor is it supposed to evoke gratitude on part of the receiver. Such unadulterated attitude towards love making reminds me of a very old story that I heard from someone once."

"Instead of making these flights of fancy or dwelling upon ancient yarns can you for once keep your mind grounded and think why were you created a man?"

"So that I may be able to think and act like a human! Study of ancient texts reveals that even in one country customs never remain constant, they vary from time to time. About the origin of Shakyas it is known that their father sent many of his sons and daughters to the forest. There, fearful of losing their varna (colour) due to intermarriage, they resorted to marrying their own brothers and sisters. Likewise there are stories about heavenly women- they do not have the institution of permanent marriages, on the contrary each time they accept men as their husbands for a day. Here too we are seeing a similar custom, it is by no means the same as prostitution. But a person from our society due to his mental conditioning cannot take it as it is".

"If you had your way, a person would have to endure thirst even though he might be sitting right next to the Ganges. Fortunately for us, even if you were to devote your entire life to this cause, you would fail to convey this unique philosophy of yours to the people here. I will take leave now, you try and get some rest. And please, if possible, try to act like one of them while we are here."

Chandra left. I lied down upon my bed and began to think. After some while I heard gentle foot steps and the damsel entered my room. I had to quickly think of something- how do I handle this situation? I wasn't being able to think of any way to convey to her of what I thought of the whole situation. I certainly had no intention to create doubts in her conscience regarding the ancient code of morality that she had grown up with. She came and sat on the bed. I stretched my legs and she began to massage them. This gave me some time to think but it was difficult to reach any decision. I was feeling like a man who suddenly happened to find himself in a cold country wearing an attire fit for tropical summers. She kept massaging my legs quietly, at times she would lift her eyes to look at my face. The first time she lifted her face, I realized that she was in fact much prettier than I had initially thought. My heart was in a turmoil, what should I do? After all I was a young man barely out of my teens. Her delicate touch was sending thrills through my body. I would begin to think that a man's moral ought to be country specific and then I would question myself- 'would I ever be able to imbibe this morality completely? If I cannot then doing so would be wrong, a philosophy of convenience."

I cannot say for how long I kept struggling with these internal conflicts and then I do not know exactly when I fell asleep. I woke up in the morning and saw the damsel fast asleep beside me. I got up quickly and went out of the room. By the time I attended to the morning rites it was already sunrise. Vijjak informed me that Chandra had still not woken up. He could not

make it to breakfast either but thankfully turned up for lunch. I said- "Do we leave now? Or not?"

"Can't say I am fully rejuvenated yet, don't feel like leaving right away".

"Let's say, this sort of hospitality is offered all through the realm, we have only just stepped inside the borders of Utsav Sanket. Remember? We have set out to see the Himalayas."

"I guess you are right. It's never a good idea for a bee to cling on to the same flower for too long. Yes we can leave now."

By afternoon we left the village, Vijjak informed us that the next village was no more than nine miles from there. By now we had accepted climbing the mountains as a challenge that we were determined to overcome. Being used to hard daily exercises we were aware that the body pain would not last for too many days. Our carriers being from the same region could climb the steepest of mountains as though they had springs attached to their feet. Vijjak too could climb with bags full of edibles hanging from his back. We asked him to send the carriers ahead of us to the next village. Mountains kept getting steeper, as we moved ahead the sky seemed overwhelmed with rows of tall mountain ranges. Today walking seemed much less taxing. And there was also the pleasure of drinking in the breathtaking sights that the verdant valley presented to our keen eyes. We were already feeling at home although as I mentioned, the climb was getting steeper. And it was getting dangerous too, we were treading narrow mountainous pathways-steep climb, half a feet wide dirt pathway and thousands of feet of fall to either side. Who wouldn't be scared! I told myself- 'If Vijjak can do it, I can do it too.' I saw a flute hanging from his rug. On my request he played a mountain people's tune. Though stylistically speaking it was quite uncomplicated, but the tune was charming in its own rustic way. I began to wish that I had brought my Veena along, but then I thought it would not have been wise to carry it around on this treacherous path. Though I had never practised playing the flute much, I borrowed it from Vijjak and played a dvipadi. This made Vijjak very happy, our mutual love for music soon made us very close friends.

By evening we reached our next village, which consisted of just four houses. We stayed at one of the houses that was moderately better built than the rest. Getting our own rooms was out of question as it had just two rooms, part of which were used to tie goats-sheep and cows. Vijjak showed the handwritten letter from the king to the village headman. The poor fellow did not know to read but he recognized the king's stamp embossed at the end of the letter. Our carriers introduced us as most distinguished guests of the king- princes from the plains. So the headman began to scurry around to make the best arrangements that he could afford

with the limited resources at his disposal. Two women arrived with hot water to wash our feet. Chandra did not like them, he found them old, ugly and dirty.

Today we were less tired. The headman served us some oat beer, we had a drink or two with him. This house had four-five men but only two women. One of the women was our guest's sister. There were some young boys in the house but no girls. Vijjak informed me that in Utsav Sanket it is customary for brothers to take a common wife and that one of the women in the house was their collective wife. I would keep asking him various sorts of questions about the people and customs of Utsav Sanket. By now he had become sufficiently close to me to be able to talk freely about customs which might have appeared scandalous to the people from the plains.

We had our dinner. It was nowhere as lavish as the food served at the king's house but I liked the meat roasted over fire and then boiled in water with salt; so also the meat-bone soup cooked over fire for over six hours. The family vacated the room that had been prepared for us. As I lied down I was wondering whether a women would be sent to us here as well when suddenly stinging itches erupted all over my body. I started itching myself desperately but doing so only seemed to make it worse; now there were rashes all over my skin. I asked Chandra- "Have you gone off to sleep? Do not worry, I am sure after attending to the household chores at least one of the women would come to comfort your exhaustion."

"Forget about the exhaustion, my body is burning with rashes."

"Is it longing fever?"

"So you aren't feeling anything?"

"I am feeling as though hundreds of needles are pricking my skin at once. Something is biting into our flesh. We cannot sleep here, let's go outside."

We called Vijjak and asked him about it. He said- "We are now in the country of fleas, I doubt it that on our road ahead we would come across any house that is free of them."

I asked Chandra- "What is your advice?"

"What is my advice? Are you suggesting that because of the fear of these puny creatures we should beat retreat?"

"Of course not. No honourable warrior can return home in peace if he chooses to flee from the battlefield. Let's go and sleep outside, underneath the open skies where these pests cannot torment us." So Vijjak dusted a small area outside the house and we lied down there. Chandra called and told him that we would not need anymore hospitality tonight."

The third day our pace increased; by the end of the week we were already feeling at home among the mountains so that now we were covering as much as twelve-fifteen miles in a day. As we moved higher among the mountains, temperature began to drop but we had plenty of warm clothes on us. By now even Chandra had begun to relish simple roasted, salt boiled meat that the people of Utsav Sanket served us. If we could find some new or old abandoned house, we would sleep inside otherwise our beds were made out in the open. Now climbing wasn't as tiresome, so we did not feel the need to flop on the bed the moment we reached our destination for the day. The mountain people were fond of drinking-dancing in the evenings. At first we could not join them but when we tried, their dance steps proved to be easy to learn, so we began to join 'heir convivial gatherings whenever we had a chance. Vijjak had made a bamboo flute for me; I noticed that the people here did not like our songs from the plains much, so I learnt to play some of their folk songs. This made joining their singing-dancing much more fun.

At times we would be faced with a steep climb or else we would be climbing down, at other times we would walk through the spine of the mountains. Often there would be extensive meadows at the foot of the mountains, here we would often come across shepherds' settlements. We spent many of our nights at such settlements. Snow clad mountain peaks looked silver during the daytime and golden in the mornings and evenings. We had set out with the intention of returning in about fifteen-twenty days but now, as though spellbound by some sort of magic cast by the Himalayas we were penetrating deeper into it.

As we moved ahead, our path kept getting more and more perilous- either a steep climb or a precipitous downward slope, at times we would walk on the spine of the mountains with steep fall staring into our faces on both sides. In between the mountains there were extensive meadows, here we would come across sheepherders' settlements. On many occasions, because we couldn't reach any village before the dark, we would have to spend our nights at such settlements.

There are two incidents from this journey that I will never forget for the thrill they caused in our hearts. One scared us to an inch of our lives and the other filled our hearts with breathtaking joy. Himalayan rivers are extremely fast and furious- exact opposite of the women there. Their waters rarely look anything like what us from the plains are used to seeing- their currents collide with the rocks to create a humongous roar and the water itself resembles frothy boiling milk. On one occasion we reached a river that we needed to cross to move ahead but there was no wooden or

rope bridge in sight. We had crossed roped bridges several times. Though it was rather scary in the beginning to pass through these wobbly bridges but at least they had solid wooden planks to step onto. But in this instance, all we could see was a rope made out of tree barks tied to two trees across the cliff. Vijjak and our other carriers took out wooden pieces eight inches long from the baskets they were carrying on their backs. The lower ends of these wooden pieces had small holes, just big enough for a rope to pass through and the upper end hand a sort of a hold for another rope. They put their wooden pieces upon the rope and then made a kind of a noose by passing another rope through the hold at the upper end. Before we could figure out what they were upto, they were already hanging upside down from the rope, gradually inching across the cliff. As they began to get down at the other end one by one, I wondered whether my courage would give way. Needless to say that the thought of falling down the cliff was giving me goosebumps. I asked Chandra - "So. What do you think?"

"What do I think? If they can do it, we can do it too. Fear is natural, they are used to doing it and its our first attempt."

By now Vijjak had prepared nooses for us too and was explaining how to drag across while hanging upside down from the rope. To prove himself fearless Chandra put the noose in his legs first. When my turn came, despite my fear, I made an effort and left the firm ground easily. But now I was hanging mid air, feets above innumerable rocks and the swift river current running across them. It was hard to imagine what would happen of me if I fell, but as soon as I found myself suspended midair, I lost my fear so that towards the end I actually began to enjoy dragging myself across. At last when I got down at the other end, it was funny to think how scared we had felt before.

The second memorable scene was our entering into the Deodar forest. Without doubt it is the most beautiful tree in the world. The brightest gem in nature's treasure chest. It has a straight and erect trunk and thousands of branches which spread out in a manner that makes the tree quite broad at the bottom and thinner towards the crest. These trees never experience fall, its always springtime for them and they diffuse a heavenly aroma about them. Their leaves have fallen upon the forest floor for so many centuries that it has become as soft as a cozy bed. One does not come across any villages in these parts, except one or two shanty huts built by sheepherders for occasional stay.

The day we entered the Deodar forest was also the first time I saw yaks. I had seen fans made out of their tails at the royal court and I had been told that they come from yaks which are in fact a kind of deer. Yaks

are mostly black in colour but some have white tails. These white tails are cut off and they serve as the sign of royalty at the court. Yaks were as big as buffaloes and they were covered from head to toe with thick dark fur. And yes, they are not a kind of deer. Herders rear them like cattle and their milk yield is very good too. I asked Vijjak to enquire about how far the snow clad mountains were. The cattle herder said - "If you take the easy route it could take you weeks to reach there, however there is a difficult path which takes just two days. Had you come two months earlier, you would have found this land itself covered with snow."

We decided to take the two days route and took cattle herders along as well. They joined us with their two yaks.

Now, we were in the valley of river Satadru. Though the current was quite far from our path, we could hear its roar from a great distance. The cattle herders told us that we could descend to the other side from the land of snow and take the path that passes through the Ganges glacier back to the plains. It had seemed like a good idea to take the two days' path but now we were regretting our decision. It was difficult to walk even ten paces without pausing for a while. We were panting to the extent that it seemed our lungs would burst open. Our companions weren't walking too fast either. The cattle herders told us that this land was infested by poisonous herbs of various kinds that make breathing difficult. The last day Chandra and me had to proceed sitting on the backs of yaks. Now we stopped panting. Chandra said- "They lie about the poisonous herbs. How is it that the poison doesn't hurt us when we sit on the yaks' backs?"

We stopped seeing the Deodar trees much before entering the land of snow. But they did not disappear abruptly; at first they were replaced by smaller trees which had an even more pleasant aroma emanating from them. Among these smaller trees which seemed to be of the same family as the Deodar, I recognized the Bhoj trees. Unlike Deodar this tree's leaves aren't pointed needle like, on the contrary they are broad like those from the plains. From a distance, its color was indistinguishable from the color of the snow. Since our childhood we had used Bhoj tree's bark to write upon but we never realized what it actually was. Vijjak peeled out a foot long, about a palm length broad and half an inch thick portion of the bark. It had several layers, each one of which could be made into dozens of Bhoj pages that could be used to write upon. In these parts people place layers of these leaves underneath their thatched roofs to keep the rains away. I had heard this long back that water cannot harm Bhoj leaves but in the summers, as it dries up, it begins to crumble. At Patliputra and elsewhere too, Palm leaves are preferred over Bhoj leaves. Probably, the reason is that latter is less long lasting. Books made out of Palm leaves cannot be

more than two-three inches wide but those made out of Bhoj leaves are much broader. Despite this Bhoj leaves are less frequently used because they are more likely to break and crumble upon turning pages. In Madhya Desha and Uttarapatha Bhoj leaves are mainly used for writing letters and other ordinary works. However, in Dakhshinapatha and Sinhala its use is very rare, probably because it is very expensive there due to their great distance from the Himalayas. Mountain people make a lot of money in summers through the sale of Bhoj leaves to the traders from the plains.

There were some patches of snow in the Bhoj forest but beyond it, as far as the eyes could see the ground was covered with white grainy snow that resembled freshly beaten cotton. Our companions plucked two Bhoj leaves each and hung them from their caps over their eyes. We were told that staring at the bright white snowy landscape is very stressful for eyes and if one is not careful one could go blind for a day or two. Chandra whispered into my ear- "Like the poisonous herbs they mean." But later I saw him carefully tuck the leaves into his cap above his eyes. "Do not want to get a first hand experience of what it's like to be blind." He said. When we reached the highest point of the mountain we were climbing, Chandra and me got down from our yaks. Up ahead to our north was a colossal range of snow capped mountains that ran parallel to the horizon. In other three directions were green mountains that grew progressively smaller as they stretched away from us. We put a few flakes of snow into our mouths but could not swallow them. I realized that at this time of the year Patliputra must be extremely hot, people drenched in sweat must have taken shelter in the underground vaults. But here we were so cold that despite being covered with heavy warm clothes and a furry leather cap, we were shivering. Our knee length Shaka shoes, that Kumaramatya had gifted us were proving to be extremely useful. But for them our feet would have frozen. Vijjak said that it was our good fortune that there was no wind, otherwise it lashes against the exposed parts of the nose and face like a whip. I was thinking- "What makes this place so different from Patliputra and Khaltika? Such extreme difference in climate over the same landmass! While descending I noticed that as we got closer to the plains the temperature began to rise. This led me to conclude that its height which causes fluctuations in temperature. But isn't the sun the source of all warmth? Then why is it that the temperature rises as we climb towards it? Many such questions kept whirling in my mind.

Now, we began our descent to the other side. This proved to be much less tiring and now we did not need to ride upon yaks. Neither did poisonous herbs' seem to affect us while descending. Chandra said- "It is more tiresome to climb upwards and one requires to consume more air in

doing so. I think there is less air up there." Vijjak said- "But I do not think so my lord. We were lucky today that it was so calm up there, otherwise at times such strong winds blow that full grown men are known to have been carried away by them." Despite this, Chandra and me had begun to doubt that poisonous herbs were the reason for breathing problems while climbing. We reached the end of the snow range and turned around for a final glance at the snow peaked magnificence of the Himalayas and then set on our journey back home. The path ahead could hardly be called a path, all we had to guide us were occasional signs like the droppings of the cattle and hoof marks of the cattle that had passed that way. It seems that the only people who venture this far up are itinerant shepherds and some mountain people who come to harvest the Bhoj bark. At one place we came across a hunter who had killed a musk deer. I got the opportunity to examine the musk gland on its belly. Its meat appeared to us similar to the deer meat we had tasted earlier. But I could not find any sign of the famous Pashmina fur over its skin. In fact it had two kinds of fur, the kind that covered it now was of a course variety and as pointy at the tips as Deodar's leaves, but underneath it was a very thin layer of extremely soft fur. The hunter told us that though in summers this fur remains small but if we were to observe it during winters, it grows so long that it covers the musk deer's entire body. This reminded me of the renowned blankets which are woven and sold at Gandhar. "After all sheep fur isn't as fine and smooth, most definitely its material comes from the winter fur of musk deer." I thought.

That night we put up at a cattle herders' tent in the Deodar forest. They served us musk deer meat for dinner. The cattle herders' could not have accompanied us in our journey further down, so we gave them three dinars each and bade farewell. Apparently satisfied with what we had given them, they departed with their yaks.

Our path passed through the Ganges valley, except for the dirt path left behind sheep herds there was no sign of a road. All we knew was that we have to proceed downward. One of our carriers had come this way several times to buy wool and collect Bhoj bark.

After many days of walk the weather began to grow warm once again. Snow and Deodar trees had already begun to seem like a distant fading memory. Vijjak told us that the path to Khaltika was somewhat atrocious as we would have to traverse across several difficult mountain ranges whereas the road to Kankhal was straight and simple. So we took the road to Kankhal. Though the water of Ganges at Kankhal still remains on the cooler side but this is the point at which this mighty river leaves its land of origin behind and enters the plains. The royal appointee at Kankhal

organized a very lavish welcome for us and we got to taste the royal food after a very long time. Afterwords the meal bottles filled with red wine were brought over. Chandra gently caressed the long thin neck and the round belly of the bottle and said- "Sweetheart! You have no idea how badly I missed you and then drank several gulps from it at one go. I am never touching oat beer again."

I asked- "So you did not like the journey Chandra?"

"Like? Jai! I will be grateful to you forever. To be honest I wasn't very eager when we set out, but now I am a fan of the Himalayas for the lifetime."

We decided to ride some distance and then take a boat to Kanyakubja. But before departing we wrote a letter addressed to the Kumaramatya at Khaltika and gave ample gifts to Vijjak. From Kanyakumbja we took another boat that took us to Patliputra. By now it was the end of the monsoons, it had been three months since we had left ajjuka.

Last Years at Patliputra

Acharya had gone to Saket during monsoon. He was supposed to be back after Ashwin-Purnima (Praravana). I had not touched my books for months now, but I did not feel that the time spent travelling through the Himalayas and talking to father had been a waste. In the course of these few months I had begun to look upon myself as a different person. It seemed as though I was still a child when I left Patliputra and now just after a few months I had returned a man. Ajjuka would keep asking me about our journey in the Himalayas. Though I did not share all my experiences I told her that most of the people who live there are Buddhists and that one often comes across Buddhist monks while travelling there. She said- "In that case I would request the Sangha to get a huge vihara constructed in the Himalayas, so that fifty-hundred monks may be able to live there comfortably and give sermons to people."

Later ajjuka donated thousands of dinar for the purpose. A place of worship and residence for monks were constructed at a beautiful spot replete with natural beauty. For the purpose of constructing this vihara a number of sculptors and other artisans were sent from Patliputra and Mathura. I am sure that the monks who left Patliputra to settle at the vihara there would be influenced by the local religion and customs themselves.

Acharya returned to Ashokaram on Kartika-Purnima and my studies began again. Next two and a half years I immersed myself in my books and Acharya's teachings. In retrospect I can easily say that the knowledge

I managed to accumulate during those years remains unmatched with any other time period during the rest of my life. I was particularly interested in philosophy. Though I had read some books in the past, it was only now that I was beginning to make sense of Acharya's vast knowledge of philosophy. Feeling that I was a deserving student he too would teach me with a lot of zeal. Hearing him praise Greek philosophers I asked one day- "Have there been good philosophers among Greeks as well?"

"A number of great philosophers- Heraclitus (525-425 B.C.), Democritus (460-370 B.C.), Socrates (466-399 B.C.), Plato (427-346 B.C.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) etc were born much before our time."

"We have had a number of Buddhist and Brahmin philosophers; were these Greek philosophers better than them?"

"If we compare it is difficult to give a monosyllabic answer in terms of 'Yes' or 'No'. They were better in certain ways. Though our philosophers have been writing over pure philosophy since very ancient times, this trend began after the arrival of Greek ideas to our country."

"So does this mean that we are indebted to Greek philosophers?"

"There is no doubt about this, though Brahmins are not ready to accept this fact now."

"But they have borrowed from the Greeks?"

"Of course. It is about three hundred years since bhadanta Ashvaghosha was born at Saket to a blessed young brahmin woman, Suvarnakshi. Kanishka's commander requested the Bhikshu-Sangha at Magadha that a great monk of learning be sent to Gandhar. Bhadanta Ashvaghosha was the first Buddhist scholar to go to Gandhar. There he learnt the Greek philosophy thoroughly and accepted many of its principles."

"Which philosophers did he like the most?"

"The ones that I just mentioned. Heraclitus was popularizing the same theories in Greece that Buddha propounded in our country. He would say- "Nothing in this world is constant, change is the law of nature. We do not step into the same river twice, every droplet of water has flown away so that when we step into it the second time it is a different river. Heraclitus accepted the law of constant flow but he considered point to be constant."

"What is point?"

"Consider point to be a metaphor. Not just the river; there is constant change in everything- rocks, bricks, gems, glass etc, but all of these, everything in the world, is constituted of microscopic atoms which do not change."

"So he accepted change as well as eternity in the world."

"But Plato did not think changeless atoms to be the microscopic building blocks of the universe. According to him the basic building block is the scientific consciousness."

"So he considered scientific-knowledge to be eternal/changeless."

"Yes, my elder brother Asanga is in agreement with Plato in accepting scientific knowledge as the basic cause of the universe, but at the same time he also accepts Buddha's theory of 'sarva anitya' (everything is in a flux)."

"So it is the flow of the scientific knowledge that lies behind what appears as the universe."

"Yes, Asanaga puts a lot of emphasis on demonstrating that it is the stream of scientific knowledge that expresses itself in the form of the universe. Bhadanta Ashvaghosha accepted the principle of atomism at the practical level but at the level of transcendental reality he accepted the flow of scientific knowledge as the basic element behind the world. Asanga popularized this same scientific-knowledge philosophy with more coherence and clarity."

"And Socrates, Aristotle?"

"We know of Socrates' theories only from the books written by his disciple Plato. Socrates never wrote a book himself. Tathagata did not write any books either. For centuries his teachings have been memorized by his followers and passed on through the word of mouth."

"Then these books Dirgha Agam, Madhyam Agam, Samyukta Agam etc that are available to us were not written by Buddha?"

"Buddha did not write any book."

"Then it is not unlikely that these books have many later additions."

"Yes it is not unlikely, even now Vinaya-code of conduct for monks and nuns are read orally."

"These books were not written during the time of Buddha?"

"Then very few books used to be written down. And do you know? Buddha wanted to pass on the right vision, therefore he said, do not accept my sermons due to my prestige, accept only what you find to be true on the basis of your own experience and intellect. For forty four years he kept roaming in the vast region between Yaudheya land and Anga land, answering to people's questions, clarifying doubts, how could all of these have been written down."

"In that case one could say that his life itself was a book."

"It is his forty four year long life book that we see in the form of books like Sutra Vinaya and Dharma Pitaka."

"Which were not put down in writing for centuries?"

"Yes, therefore we cannot say that every syllable of what is written in this book was uttered by Buddha, but it is also true that we cannot find Buddha's sermons anywhere else either."

"Even the language must have been different then?"

"You have read the language used in Ashoka's inscriptions, that language is five hundred years old. Lord Buddha was born two and a half hundred years before Ashoka, so one can guess that the language during his time must have been still more different."

"But Bhante! The Pitakas that exist today seem to have been written in a slightly deformed version of Sanskrit."

"Yes, Sarvastivadins' Pitaka is written in Sanskrit. Apart from them, there are a number of other Buddhist Nikayas (sects) whose Pitakas are written in Sanskrit, but Sinhala's Buddhist Nikaya's Pitaka is preserved in old Kosali (Pali)."

"So they preserved safely the same language in which Buddha had delivered his sermons."

"I would not say that they could have preserved it as it is, there too for centuries Pitaka's were passed on through memory, but I understand that the language they use is very close to Buddha's language and the sermons preserved in their Pitakas are very close to what Buddha actually might have said."

"So, were Socrates' ideas preserved in a similar manner?"

"Do you know? Socrates was forced to drink poison. The state had become his enemy."

"Who was the king then Acharya?"

"Athens would not become a monarchy for at least half a century more."

"So the people of the republic killed Socrates?"

"Not the republic, rich power holders of the republic are to blame."

"True Acharya, the rich are always a threat to a republic"

"Socrates began to say that the stories about gods and goddesses were not true; that the people of Athens must shed such superstitions and start using their intellect. The rich in Athens and the members of assembly whom they had bought with their money felt that Socrates had become a

threat to them because like here, there too the difference between rich and poor was justified through religion."

"Meaning, the rich had understood that if the toiling masses, peasants and artisans who work through rain and shine, producing wealth through the sweat of their brow stopped believing in gods, they would overthrow the unjust social order thrust upon by the kings-lords, priests and rich merchants."

"But they could not have spelt out their fears in so many words. The people of Athens had faith in their gods, so the rich told them-Socrates has insulted our gods, he is a heathen, he will make our youth heathen."

"And then Socrates was given a bowl of poison."

"Socrates accepted that bowl happily."

"But Socrates' murder was not avenged, what a shame?"

"It is yet to be avenged."

"But the people who served him the poison bowl are no longer alive."

"You think the blame for his murder lies upon certain specific members of the assembly? Imagine what would happen if someone here began saying- 'All the gods and goddesses are false, the rich are unjust for using the authority of these gods to plunder the earnings of the toiling masses. We need to set up a new republic in which people would not be rich or poor. Let all work as per their abilities and the republic may in return take care of their needs."

"Did Socrates say all this?"

"Did I not say that Socrates did not leave behind any books; but his disciple Plato wrote a book called 'Republic' in which he explicates the thoughts of his teacher."

"Socrates understood the flaws that might afflict a republic. I too see similar flaws among Yaudheyas. If I were to become the Socrates of Agrodka they would most probably treat me in the same manner as the Athenians did."

"It is for the accumulation of wealth that people behave like this. Republics too think that plundering the earnings of craftsmen, peasants and toilers is sanctioned by religion. Monarchy is much worse in this regard. Socrates said-Only such people should be made the members of assembly and allowed to exercise the state power who neither have property nor women of their own."

"Nor have women of their own! Bhante did Socrates mean that monks should run the state?"

"No, he did not mean that only monks should be allowed to run the state. What he meant is that people should not have separate wives of their own. If there are separate wives then there would be separate children, then the father would be biased in their favour and misuse his power to bring benefits for them through the use of state power. So he proposed that people in charge of running the republic should have everything in common, house-property and even women."

"So Socrates thought it too? Bhandant, I have just returned from the Himalayas; there they have common wives."

"That is because they are still very backward. When they reach the same state of development as the Yaudheyas or Patliputra and begin to accumulate wealth; such an arrangement would have to go."

"From all of this it seems that Socrates wanted to make the world a better place. So the people whose selfish interests he was threatening got together to get him to leave the world."

"Think about the afterworld, prepare well for the next birth; if one says such things, rich leaders of the republics, Parambhattaraks of monarchies, brahmins and merchant princes would shower upon you wealth and praise, but if one begins to talk about making this world itself better they would condemn you to the same fate as Socrates."

"But Bhante! They spend so much on religious festivals, temples, rites and sacrifices; why can they not use the same wealth to make the world a better place?"

"Because that wealth is not at all enough for the welfare of even a few of us. Say, Parambhattarak rules over 30 million subjects. If he were to distribute 30 million dinars, each one of them would get 1 dinar. How much better can a man's life become if he gets richer by that 1 dinar? But for the emperor making this donation would entail a great deal of sacrifice. He would have to give up his ivory seats and emerald studded throne to sit on a simple mat; the harem would have to be shut down and so would be the fate of his vast retinue. The royal kitchen would no longer be able to serve the many hundred dishes that it prepares daily. So many sacrifices would have to be made to accumulate 30 million dinars and the results too do not seem to be that great. Does it not make more sense to keep 29 million for oneself and invest the rest in building temples, chaityas, sacrifices, rituals and donation to brahmins? The brahmins would in return sing praises for the generous emperor. Harisena would compose beautiful poetry to immortalize his glory which would then be inscribed on stone pillars."

"And the Parambhattarak would be called Dharmaraj (devout emperor) by his grateful subjects."

"So you see, between the two it is more beneficial for a king to donate for the afterworld in comparison to doing charity for the well being of his people in this world."

"And the shramans-brahmins who receive donations from the emperor would say that he is the king due to his good deeds in the last birth whereas the toiling majority is suffering for its bad deeds. Such a useful thing this is, the theory of accumulation of good and bad deeds in the last birth!"

Acharya smiled at me and said- "Son Jai! I am so happy that you understand what I say. You are the only good student I could find in my old age. I left Gandhar with the hope that if I can find an able student from some royal family and teach him well, he would use all his strength to make this world a better place upon becoming the emperor. I knew that Aristotle made the same error of judgement six centuries ago but people in this world tend to repeat mistakes"

"What did Aristotle do?"

"Aristotle was Plato's disciple. Plato had seen his teacher being murdered by the republic and he wanted revenge for it."

"Eye for an eye?"

"Eye for eye is sought by the shortsighted. Did I not just say? If you were to become a Socrates in the Yaudheya land, seeking to make the world better by divesting the rich of their rich harvest of the toiling majority's earnings then most likely you would be served the poison bowl too. And if you were to do the same in a Parambhattarak's empire,he would not even allow you the luxury of a quick death, novel means of torture would be devised to ensure that you are meted out a slow and painful death."

"I agree with you."

"What did Plato observe in the world? Inequality of wealth, sovereignty based on accumulated wealth, use of sovereignty to plunder yet more wealth and unimaginable tortures for those who come in the way. There was only one panacea for these afflictions-end of private property, if all could share everything that the human society produced. Plato tried all his life to teach this wisdom to his people and wrote the 'Republic' for the same purpose. Many had felt remorse after Socrates' murder. Not all the members of the assembly belonged to the greedy affluent section of the society. So Plato was not asked to consume poison. Aristotle wanted to take forward the noble project started by his

predecessors, so he thought of a way to achieve it- 'If I can educate an able and energetic prince, then he can easily actualize the kind of world we have dreamt of. With this objective in his mind he became the mentor of king Philip's son Aliksunder (Alexander). But what did Alexander do? To satiate his dark ambitions he drenched a very big part of our world in blood."

"Bhante, one can still have some expectations from the children born in a republic, but one would have to be extremely naive, or unaware of the inherent brutality and heinousness of the life at the royal palace to hope that a prince can renounce his empire and set about changing the world."

"It is possible that like me, Aristotle too did not realize this."

"Bhante, in my opinion 'an eye for an eye' was an easier way to avenge Socrates' death. To overthrow the entire set up that caused him to die is by far a more difficult task. No single individual, not even a group of people can achieve this within their lifespans."

"But still, we must do what is right."

"Meaning Bahujanahitaya (in the interest of the masses)"

"Yes, we must stick to what is Bahujanahitaya-Bahujanasukhaya (In the interest of the masses- for the well being of the masses). Do you know what message Tathagatha gave to his first disciples before sending them to the world to preach- 'Roam the world Bhikshus for the welfare of the masses—in the interest of the masses."

"But Bhante! Why didn't they succeed?"

"I cannot tell all the reasons, but Tathagata had suggested strict rules of conduct to ensure that the feeling of 'mine-thine' did not arise within the Bhikshu Sangha. These codes of conduct are still present in Vinaya-Pitaka, but within a few years after his death the feeling of 'mine-thine' entered the sangha. Tahthagata had proposed that except personal clothes, needle, razor and begging bowl etc everything owned by the sangha must remain the common property of the entire sangha, but within a very short span after his death Bhikshus began to haggle over how wealth that came to the sangha ought to be divided. When the entire world is caught up in petty bickerings over 'mine-thine', how could one expect a handful of Bhikshus to remain immune to this disease?"

"Bhante, unfortunately now we see rich and poor even among the Bhikshus."

"Yes son, the Bhikshu sangha failed to live up to the expectation that Tathagatha had reposed in it."

"Then Bhante! There is no hope for this world?"

"Cynicism is a sign of death. Our failures teach us that fulfilling this noble endeavour would require efforts spanning several generations, more resources would be required."

In these last two and a half years Acharya would seem as eager to teach as I was enthusiastic to learn. It seemed as though Acharya was trying to shed some weight from his conscience by passing on all his knowledge to an able student. Teaching me seemed to have become his primary preoccupation. Often he would take me along to Rajagriha. There we would stay at Griddhakuta. One day Acharya was standing on a huge rock at Griddhakuta. An ochre robe hanging casually over his fair skin, he stood observing the land surrounded by the five hills of Rajgriha. As he looked on several fleeting emotions-compassion, anxiety, hope and pain passed through his eyes; he said- "Son, this is the place where there used to be a grand metropolis once; numerous marketplaces, lines of shops, squares, huge mansions belonging to the rich, lords' bungalows used to thrive here. On the southern end of the metropolis was located emperor Bimbasara's royal palace; just as Parambhattaraka's palace is located at Patliputra and Devaputra Shahi's at Purushpur. Bimbasara'a palace wasn't any less grand, in the evenings sonorous sounds of numerous palace ladies singing in unison would engulf the valley. What do you see here today? Is there any sign of the past splendour here?"

"No Acharya, I hear no singers here, only the howling of jackals in the evenings."

"This same emperor Bimbasara was put in jail by his son Ajatashatru for the rest of his life. Why did he do that? For the state power. He did not care in the least about the next birth or the afterlife."

"For the rulers and the rich, concepts like afterlife, rebirth etc are like a tusker's teeth; one to show off to the world and the other set to eat. And, Bhante! Buddhists too believe in afterlife-rebirth but insofar as I have understood, belief in the afterlife and bahujan hitay are mutually contradictory concepts."

"So son! You do not believe in afterlife?"

"I consider belief in afterlife-rebirth beyond belief and disbelief."

"No Jai! Speak without hesitation."

"Bhanta! I do not hesitate in expressing my opinions to you, you have rid me of the fear of speaking my mind long back. I think that wasting even a single moment of one's life for the sake of afterlife is useless. Those who fret about their fate in the next birth-afterlife are in my opinion naive, mad or probably just swindlers."

"You use very harsh words Jai!"

"Afterlife-rebirth etc are meant to deceive the gullible—Acharya. It is due to these false beliefs that this world has become a living hell; these beliefs reduce nine hundred and ninety nine to the status of sheep and valorize one as the tiger among men destined to prey upon the rest. I accept Bahujana Hitaya as a just cause worthy enough to live and die for. Afterlife is acceptable to me in only one form."

Acharya smiled and asked- "And what is that son?"

"A son is his father's afterlife; he is his rebirth. Before dying, a father contributes a portion of his psychical and mental constitution to the womb of a woman. The woman too adds a portion from her own body and nurtures a new life for nine months and when the time comes she brings into the world a new life for the next world, for the next generation.This new born child is the rebirth of a man and woman, this child is their afterlife; the only form in which I accept the concept of rebirth-afterlife."

"And to take care of this afterlife we need not contemplate about some other world into which we might born be after our deaths?"

"Yes Bhante! If we begin to believe in afterlife in this form, nobody would be deceived into thinking that their present miserable lot is a result of sins committed in the last birth. Our eyes would firmly be set upon making the world here, present before our eyes better."

"Your thoughts are beautiful Jai! Brahminism believes in the eternity and changelessness of soul. In order to counter this theory I wrote in my book Abhidhamma Kosha- to desire the eternity of soul and fear of death are signs of petty selfishness and cowardice. A person incapable of petty greed and cowardice may never become free, may never attain Nirvana?"

"You are right Acharya! I too consider concepts of afterlife and rebirth a result of petty selfishness and cowardice. Fearful that death might mean the end of everything, a full stop to our existence, we invent concepts like rebirth and afterlife to give solace to our troubled minds. But is this solace worth the price that we pay in return. We are forced to accept that the king is the king due to his good deeds in the last birth and we deserve no better than our present miserable lot because we committed sins in our last birth. Even though we see injustice all around our hands are tied and our minds firmly fixed upon the next birth. If these lies did not exist then there would have been no justification for the naked plunder of the poor's earning by the rich."

"Good! son, Good! I have written a lot to prove the correctness of Buddhist philosophy but whatever arguments I have given to prove

afterlife and Nirvana seemed weak even to me. Tathagata did not believe that there was anything such as an eternal unchanging soul; if this is so then who is it; what is it that may attain Nirvana, aren't we unchanging all the while? Yes, but if we understand the nirvana of a life in the same manner as we understand the nirvana of a lamp-to become extinguished; to fade out, then we need not at all worry about what happens of our remains after we fade out. All we need to care about is the life we lead before fading out."

"We all know Bhante, there is enough and conclusive proof for rebirth of this existing body while it is still alive. A human dies and is reborn every moment. Like everything else in the world, human body and mind, two things of which he is made of, too are in constant motion, they are dying every moment and are reborn every moment. The mind-body that exists this moment is this world and the ones which are going to come into existence next moment or the moment after the next one are its afterlife. Apart from this, another aspect of the afterlife is that whose flow remains constant till eternity-the generations which follow us, our children, grand children and the great grandchildren-they are our afterlife."

"I accept that your theory of afterlife is far superior to the sort of afterlife conceived by the brahmins-shramanas; because only in this form can the theory of afterlife become Bahujana Hitaya (in the interest of the masses). The afterlife of brahmins-shramanas is ekahitaya (in the interest of one) because it encourages the robbery of the earnings of nine hundred and ninety nine by one plunderer."

"It does not just encourage. The plunderer-robber whose proper place is at the gallows sits on the royal throne, fanned with chamar (yak fur fan used to fan the royalty) and declared dharmaraja (devout emperor)! Bhante! in my opinion the concept of afterlife propagated by brahmins-shramanas is the ideology of robbers-plunderers, this theory cannot ever become Bahujanahitaya (in the interest of the masses)."

"So Jai! Having read and understood all this is the conclusion that you have reached?"

"My intellect and experience guide me towards this direction. Tathagata said—nothing is eternal, things are in constant flux—the greatest truth in the world is that everything is subject to change—I accept this. Change is the natural law of all existence, there is no need for the existence of a God or an eternal being for this to happen. I have reached the conclusion that kings and emperors had the greatest role in spreading the idea of God. Seeing the Lord of this world led people to imagine the Lord of heavens. Despotism of the Lord of heaven was cited to explain the despotism of the

Lord on earth. 'Surrender everything you possess unto God' this wisdom was not formulated for the benefit of the imaginary Lord of the heaven, but for the real and tangible benefits of the Lord on earth who plunders and robs us."

"Son Jai! Now I am thinking, if the people who once inhabited this megapolis had cared for the sort of afterlife you believe in then what would have been the fate of this world?"

"In my opinion Bhante! This world would have been a better place. The millionaire merchants who lived at Rajgriha are no more; we do not know who their descendants are but this does not mean that in our present society such people who suck the rest nine hundred and ninety nine dry,do not exist. Ajatshatru did.not care for his father, nor did he care for his mother's clan. The only sentiment that motivated him through his life was nis own self interest; do we know where his descendants are today? It is possible that they are a part of the nine hundred and ninety nine today but plunderers like Ajatshatru still thrive, with new names and new titles. Bhante! I have understood, till the time the difference between nine hundred and ninety nine and one can be removed, this world will remain a hell for the living and people would continue to seek solace in the hope of an imaginary heaven after their death."

I was twenty years old now. Acharya Vasubandhu was now ready to leave for Gandhar. I think Acharya would have left long back if I had not been his student and he did not have consideration for Ajjuka's affection and respect. I cannot say that I had learnt everything that Acharya knew, he was an immense repository of knowledge, but he did say once- "Son, you are the best students I have ever had." Having spent nineteen years of my life at the royal palace, I was now feeling eager to step out and explore the vast world that lied outside. Acharya had said- "At Sinhala they have preserved Tathagata's sermons in a purer form. With Parambhattarak's permission, some years back the king of Sinhala had got built a vihara for the Sinhalese bhikshus at Vajrasana (Bodhgaya). Once I met some Bhikshus there who gave me some manuscripts written in the old script. But I was not satisfied yet, so I decided to visit Sinhala to read more.

But the question was, how to reach Sinhala? Spending ten-twenty thousand dinars was not a big issue for me. But the idea of travelling as a rich man did not appeal to me. Ajjuka could have got me sent to Sinhala as Parambhattaraka's ambassador, but I did want not to take advantage of my royal connection either. I had education but I was still very young. Moreover, education could secure a livelihood only if the ruling elite agreed to patronize me; something that I did not want. I desired to be a free willed traveller but not a beggar. I had learnt the art of sculpture, in fact I was

very good at it. I could play the veena with considerable skill and I could sing too. I thought these are the skills through which I could earn my livelihood during my travels. The year before I left, I brushed up these skills, practised my hands at the use of weapons too; but the biggest difficulty was saying goodbye to Ajjuka. Last year father had passed away, since then she had grown still more attached to me. She would come to my residence for a visit everyday. Chandra had become aloof now. He had a world of his own now and he hardly had time for anything outside it. At times Ajjuka would try to gauge what I had in my mind- "What have you thought about your future?" I would say- "Ajjuka, I want to remain a student for a few more years."

"But you have already studied so much! Acharya cannot stop talking about how well you have done."

"Acharya is generous. He is a treasure trove of knowledge, I could not learn all of it, but Acharya wants to leave now. So I thought I could spend some more years acquiring knowledge."

I started visiting some other scholars at Patliputra, mainly to make Ajjuka believe that I intended to stay at Patliputra and study more. But Ajjuka had grown suspicious, particularly when she would hear that I showed no interest among the women in the royal palace. It is not that I hated women, that I did not appreciate beauty or I could not enjoy dance-music. But somehow I could not be amorous like Chandra. Whenever the thought of casual lustful liaison with a woman came to my mind, it was as if cold Himalayan winds began to blow in my heart. But I did not find life dull. Apart from the company of women there were various other things like reading, exercise, music and sculpture that kept me occupied. Still to an extent I would feign being close to some women just to assure ajjuka that I was not contemplating becoming a monk in Acharya Vasubandu's company. A number of princes and ministers from the kingdoms of Dakshinapatha (south) lived at Patliputra, I would ask them what their country was like.

Shipwrecked

One day Acharya got on the boat to Strughan. A lot of people had come to bid farewell to him. I went along up to the confluence of Ganges and Sarayu. While offering him the last salutations my eyes got moist. Acharya said- "Affection is not a bad thing because it teaches us the value of parting. Bidding farewell gives us the strength to break the narrow bounds of excessive attachment to our near and dear ones, we must understand that

we are all travellers in this world. Meeting and parting are inevitable in the journey of life. It is true that I am a ripe fruit and might drop dead any moment, but son, we ought not worry too much about what is inevitable. The only thing worthy of worrying about is our goal in life. So long as I live, I will repose hope in you. Even after we are dead, our ideas can enlighten the generations to follow."

I offered my last salutations to Acharya and jumped off into my small boat. To set my mind off the gloom of parting ways with my mentor I began to row the boat along with the boatmen.

Saying goodbye to ajjuka was proving very difficult. Of all her scattered love for her numerous relatives and friends, she reserved a big portion for me. Though it cannot be said that ajjuka was an extraordinary woman but she had patience, ability to reason and generosity. When I broached the topic of my impending departure she looked like she would be able to keep her calm, looking at me coolly, not daring to blink as though trying to control her tears. But she could not restrain herself, her eyes began to well up and no sooner did she blink that big droplets of tear began to roll down her cheeks. She wanted to say something but all she could manage was an incomprehensible quivering of lips. I could not think of anything to say to console her, all I said was- "Ajjuka it is necessary for me to make this journey for the realization of my goal, I could as well have run away on some pretext but I have decided that I would not leave till my ajjuka grants me her assent."

Now ajjuka began to visit me everyday. She would insist on feeding me with her own hands. Seeing her come to my residence everyday, I began to visit her palace myself. Though I met her everyday, it was very difficult to talk about my departure to her again. One day she said herself- "Jai! You love me a lot?"

"Of course ajjuka! you are my sister as well as my mother."

"Dear Jai! For a while I had forgotten that I was born not at the royal palace of Patliputra. I was born at Agrodka in the Yaudheya land. Yaudheya women do not shed tears even while preparing their husbands for the battlefield. You carry a lot of responsibilities. Any sister or mother wl feel proud to have an able brother or son like you."

So one day I hugged ajjuka and bid her farewell. I headed towards Sinhala but did not want to take a straight route. Before reaching there I wanted to see other countries to the south of Magadha (Dakshinapatha). I had learnt at Patliputra that south of Magadha's boundary people spoke languages which would not be easy for me to understand but I had also been told that the royal clans and brahmins of the kingdoms to the south

spoke a language that was very close to Magadhi. There were two routes that I could choose from—either I could walk or take a boat through Ganges up to the seaport at Tamralipti and then take a sea vessel from there to the countries down south. The other route passed through dense forests. This one was considered very dangerous for travellers. Fortunately I met Simha Verma who became my friend and fellow traveller. We were similar in many ways; he was a good painter and a swordsman like me and he too believed that the real fun of travelling lied in treading dangerous paths. We decided to travel through the forest. This route passed via Gaya to reach Kalinga. So our journey began—we would travel during the day and stop at some inn or roadside village to rest for the night. Though I had taken a letter of identification from Parambhattaraka, I did not want to use it unless faced with some grave danger. We met many caravans on the way but chose not to join any of them. Till we entered the forest we had the company of a number of weight bearers. But once inside it we left most of our luggage behind except the ones we considered essential, carrying those ourselves. Simha Verma told me that the weather would be on the cooler side up to Suhm but beyond it woollen clothes would not be necessary. Both of us were carrying one coarse woollen blanket each, which we would spread wherever we stopped to rest. We had a few spare cotton clothes to wear but had left our silk and linen garments behind. It was better to travel like ordinary men, we thought. Swords hung on our waists at all times and we had also carried our bows and some arrows in a quiver to hunt whenever an opportunity presented itself. Apart from all these I had some dinars for sudden unforeseen expenses.

We had been travelling through the forest for many days now. A small caravan of about twenty people was travelling along. It was noon. We were resting underneath a shady tree when about twenty-twenty five people appeared from the forest, running. Many were wounded and bleeding. Apart from the clothes on their bodies and swords hanging from their waists they carried nothing. They told us that they were part of a caravan consisting of about seventy men and carrying around twenty carts full of merchandize headed for the markets to the south. They had set up camp to rest for the night, about eight miles from where we had found them. In the morning, as they were getting ready to resume their journey, suddenly they were ambushed by hundreds of Shabars (a forest dwelling tribe). For a short while they tried to fight Shabars off but within moments at least thirty-thirty five of their men fell, either dead or wounded. "Realizing that we were heavily outnumbered, we fled and hid ourselves in the forest. Shabars looted all our merchandize and took many of our men prisoners. Many of our fellow travellers are still hiding inside the

forest and none of us knows of the fate of Vishnu Das, the leader of our caravan."

We listened to them carefully. We were on the same path and Shabars would most likely intercept us too. The question was, whether we should move forward or turn back. Most of our caravan members were in two minds but Simha Verma and I said- "Turning back is not safe either. Shabars can spread the news of our presence among their clansmen very fast. Turning back is no less dangerous than moving ahead. It is possible that Shabars would not attack us because our caravan is not carrying much merchandize. There are thirty five of us at the moment, our numbers would increase further when some of the people hidden in the forest join us."

After a brief discussion it was decided that moving ahead was better. As we moved ahead, in twos and fours more people from the caravan that had been attacked earlier joined us. Now we were a party of seventy. All of us had swords and some had bows and arrows as well. People from the plundered caravan had lost everything they were carrying to the robbers so they had no reason to turn back, and the ones in our caravan who had seemed hesitant earlier were also marching now without any sign of fear. After a day's travel we reached the spot where the battle had been fought. There we found just two men, badly wounded. Twenty people had died. We did not consider cremating them, because lighting a fire would have meant extending an open invitation to Shabars to come back. Only one cart had been left behind and it had some food in it. The wounded were crying out for water, so we fetched some for them from a nearby stream. They told us that Vishnu Das had been wounded in the course of the battle, but he had continued to fight bravely till a Shabar hit one of his legs with a spear. Then they had carried him away on one of the carts. We also got to know from them that Shabars were not more than fifty in number but because the caravan had been ambushed suddenly, they had got scattered and failed to put up a good fight. We gave them some first aid and helped them lie down on one of the carts. I said to Simha Verma- "Friend Simha! Vishnu Das gave them fierce resistance, they would give him a very painful death. They have taken the cart along, so it is not very difficult to trace which way they have gone. We should leave behind five-six men to watch over the carts and give them a chase."

Simha Verma was in agreement with me but some were not too enthusiastic about attacking the Shabars, so we said those who wanted to stay back may move with the carts and the rest must come with us to save Vishnudas. Most of the people from our caravan seemed reluctant; chasing Shabars would most likely result in a violent death, but when one by one

many joined us, most of the rest too felt embarrassed about abandoning a man to certain death. In the end we had to force six men to stay with the carts and follow us at a distance. We moved ahead swiftly. Before sunset we managed to reach the spot from where the wheel tracks had left the dirt path and moved towards the forest. We hung a piece of red cloth at the spot and entered the forest. At a distance we saw high flames and then voices of people as we closed in. I asked our party to halt and crept forward through the bushes. Thankfully it wasn't fall season yet, or it would have been impossible to close in without creating a deal of noise over dried leaves. As I neared in, I noticed that the carts were arranged in a circle, the oxen were tied inside it and on the other side a fire was smouldering. Around thirty shabars were squatting around it; it was about to get dark. I thought in the dark it would become impossible to see their dark bodies. Except for a small piece of cloth on their waists they had nothing on their bodies; though they had bird feathers stuffed over their hairs. Most of them were quite short but their physique could easily give a complex to the best of us; their thin waists, broad chests and bulging biceps reflected how much strength their bodies had. I was running my eyes all over the place, trying to figure out where Vishnu Das might be. And then I saw something tied to one of the carts, though I couldn't be certain but something told me that it might be our wounded Vishnu Das. I crept back to our people and told them everything I had seen, partly whispering and partly explaining through sign language. After some consultation with Simha Verma it was decided that with thirty men he would attack them from the left and I would come upon them with the rest of the men from the right side; we also decided upon a signal cry to indicate the beginning of the attack. It was about to get dark so we were in a hurry.We scattered ourselves and gradually moved towards the cart, hiding behind the trees as we approached them. We wanted to take them by surprise but Shabars had become aware of our presence. So when we attacked them with battle cries they were ready for us. We attacked simultaneously from two sides. Our sudden arrival did not give them time to use their bows and arrows to much effect, otherwise we would have sustained more losses. We were more adept than them in using swords and spears.For sometime the battle raged amidst the clanging of swords and the thuds of wounded bodies falling on the ground. About half of the Shabars fell injured, the rest fled towards the forest. Then we searched the carts and found Vishnudas tied to one of them, badly wounded. Simha Verma untied him, he was very thirsty. Too weak to speak he gestured towards water which was then brought to him. As he regained some of his strength, Vishnudas told us that before our arrival most of the Shabars had already left with the expensive merchandise from the carts for their settlement located deeper

inside the forest. So, we decided to leave as soon as possible, fearing that Shabars might come back with more men.

We tied the carts together and turned back towards the spot where we had tied the red piece of cloth. Our six friends had already reached there with the rest of the carts. Now Vishnu Das needed to decide whether to head towards Magadha or to turn back. He reasoned- "Most of our expensive merchandise has been lost, many of our caravan members are dead, our best fighters among them, so it is pointless to head towards Magadha." He decided to turn back.

While travelling through the forest Shabars weren't our only fear. Herds of elephants or tigers could attack us. And we also knew that Shabars would not sit quietly after our attack, they would definitely try to track us. The pathfinder of the caravan sat on the cart at the front trying to ascertain the path in pitch darkness. We kept walking through the night. By morning we reached a water tank which had a small Chandi temple by its side. In fact it could hardly be called a temple, it was just a raised brick platform, over which was placed a rough piece of stone with vermillion daubed over it. They called this place Chandi sthana. The priest Bhatta told us that he was a brahmin but his coal black skin and red eyes gave the lie to his claim. He and a middle aged woman lived here. The woman was fairer in complexion. In her youth she might have been a beauty but now she seemed like a shadow of her past self. She was wearing an ochre robe, from her neck hung a protective talisman and her hair had dreadlocks tied into a bun. She seemed more sociable than the priest. We were welcomed cordially by her. When Vishnu Das had passed by this temple two days back he had asked the woman to tell his fortune. She had said that everyting was alright except for a minor threat that he might encounter on the way. Seeing Vishnu Das wounded she expressed grief. Though she did not need to be reminded, Vishnu Das himself said- "Your prediction came true Arya! The threat in fact was very grave but through your prayers and grace I managed to escape almost unscathed. The priestess then examined the wounds and applied a number of herbs and crushed coal on it. Now she predicted that the worst was over and there was no need to feel worried.

We were tired and hungry, and so people immediately set down to prepare a meal. Upon being asked, Bhatta told us that Shabars might attack us here as well. I had serious doubts that he was himself implicated with them, otherwise why would a person choose to lead a desolate life in this scary forest? Simha Verma had a different perspective- "No, he is not here to practise penance. The woman needed a man to look after her in her middle age and the ugly Bhatta is more than happy being here, taking care of her. You think he could get a better woman? And the priestess is beyond

the age to conceive, so they need not fear that a child might be born." Whenever Bhatta displayed the slightest sign of moving beyond our vicinity we would become tensed, fearing that he might have gone to inform the Shabars of our presence. We wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

After lunch we rested a while. Vishnu Das offered some gifts to the temple and the priestess and then we set out on our journey again. It took us no less than ten days to pass through the forest. On one occasion we feared being attacked by a herd of elephants but we had lit a lot of fire all around our camp. It is believed that wild beast do not come near fire.

We reached the city of Suhmdesha. Vishnu Das' wounds were almost healed by now, but he was still very weak. In the city he had an acquaintance, a fellow caravan member and a distant relative, so he decided to stay here and rest till he recovered completely. By now Vishnu Das considered me nothing less than his life saviour and the rest of the caravan too had begun to look upon me as a sort of a leader. Vishnu Das kept insisting that we must accompany him to his own city after he had recovered but because our routes were different politely we turned down his request. So he wrote a number of letters of reference to his fellow merchants and leaders of caravans of Utkal and Kalinga to help facilitate the rest of our journey. After he had written no less than ten such letters we had to request him not to write anymore of them. What we had now was a big bundle of letters tied together, each one of them running into several pages as Vishnu Das could not resist heaping praises upon us in each one of them. At the end of each letter he had put his seal of identification.

For one whole month we had been out of touch with the city life. While travelling neither had we been able to eat proper food nor could we afford any of the simple city luxuries.The later half of our journey had been particularly taxing. Due to the fear of Shabar's impending attack, we had been forced to leave behind even our carts in order to hasten our pace of march. At the houses of the merchants of Suhm city, we once again had access to several luxuries that one usually comes across at the houses of wealthy Pataliputra merchants. These cities had always sought to imitate the lifestyle of citizens of Patliputra. The attraction for Magadhan things had increased even more since Parambhattarak's successful campaign towards south. Due to the exhaustion and hardships of the journey we had shed some weight and our faces had gone pale. But the merchants were taking good very care of all our needs. We were now taking herbal baths, eating the best of cuisines and wearing clean linen. Their young slaves would be ready all the time to serve us and fuss over our small

needs. Despite all this, it took us almost a week to fully regain our health and spirits. The city had a lot to offer by way of entertainment but we only preferred dance and music. Simha Verma took out his brush and made his first painting. It became so famous among the merchants and bankers of the city that now most of his time would be spent making paintings for one doting patron or the other. Our new merchant friend's daughter made several overtures to Simha Verma through her slave girl to get him to make a portrait of her. Simha Verma did not want to say no. Though he tried several times without much success. Skilled as he was in the Indian style of painting, he could make excellent paintings from his imagination but he was not trained to sketch a live subject on paper. Seeing him try and fail several times, I prepared a canvas and secretly began to draw a sketch of the young woman whenever I could catch a glimpse of her, sitting on the window facing our room. After four days of hard labour, my painting was ready. Simha Verma's painting was ready too, but he had drawn the picture of an imaginary lady, not the merchant's daughter. I told him- "You may present the portrait drawn by me to the girl, but only on the condition that you should not tell her that it was drawn by me. Tell her that you drew it."

"But how could I say that my friend? You have drawn it!"

"But I do not want both of us to become famous as painters. You become the famous painter and let me remain an able swordsman."

I had observed—whenever the young girl sat before Simha Verma to get her portrait made she would keep gazing at his face, turning away only when I entered the room for some work. Simha Verma put both the paintings before her and said- "Beauty, this is your real portrait and the other one is your imaginary painting."

The young woman was very happy and expressed a lot of gratitude, but when Simha Verma mentioned that he was about to set out on his journey she suddenly became very sad. To hide her grief she looked away. But when she turned her face again towards him her eyes were full of tears- "What is the hurry? Can't you stay for a bit longer?"

Simha Verma told everything to me. I was in a fix. I knew that Simha Verma would not decide to stay any longer against my wish, but his own desire was to spend a few days more with the young woman. We decided that we could stay in the city for a while longer but we must not be a burden on the merchant anymore. The merchant would hear none of it, but he agreed readily when we told him that we would leave the city unless he allowed us to subsist on our own through selling our artworks. The merchant found a house for us situated inside a garden outside the

It was a beautiful garden. Some very able gardener had planted numerous varieties of flowers which were in full bloom now, indicating the arrival of the spring. There was a small cottage in the middle of the garden, where we lived. At some distance was a river, which resembled a golden line etched over the landscape. We loved to be here. Simha Verma's art was in such demand that he would be busy painting all day. I too needed to take to some profession to kill time. I could begin practising sculpture but I did not want both of us to become famous as artists. It would not have been wise to become famous for learning or swordsmanship, lest the news should reach the royal palace and we be summoned to serve the king. In the end I decided to be a music teacher. I bought a veena and some other musical instruments. It was not very difficult to get students. After displaying my skills at a few concerts people began to seek me out to teach music to their children. Parambhattaraka Samudragupta's love for music had generated interest in it not just at Patliputra. Magadhan dinars carrying an image of the emperor playing a veena embossed over it had raised the prestige of this instrument far and wide. Especially Patliputra style of music was a lot in demand these days. Knowledge of music and dance was considered essential for the young women of the city. Rich merchants and noblemen began to invite me to their houses to teach dance and music to their daughters. So Simha Verma and me became famous as a skilled painter and a music teacher from Patliputra.

The merchant's daughter and Simha Verma's love was deepening now. It was spring time, the flowers were in full bloom, dull humming of the bees could be heard all day. There was a sweet aroma in the air all around. People were celebrating the spring festival. Merchant's daughter would often come to our garden. Seeing the bond deepen was beginning to make both anxious about their future. One day Simha Verma said to his beloved- "Dear, now we have reached a point where we must take a decision."

The girl laughed and said in a teasing tone- "Are we yet to reach a decision?"

"Insofar as the two of us are concerned, of course we have already taken a decision, but now we need the seal of your parents' approval upon it."

"And if they do not give their approval?"

"So you must try and know their opinion about this."

"What if they do not agree?", said the girl with some alarm in her voice.

Simha Verma gently touched her locks falling carelessly over her face, looked into her eyes and said- "Do not worry dear, my friend Jai will find a way out."

But I did not need to find a way out. I knew that the merchant had by now drawn very close to both of us. He thought of us as good young men from nice families and refused to let us leave every time we said it was time for us to resume our journey.

One day I again told him that we would like to move on now. The merchant said- "Aren't you going towards Kalinga port? I am about to go there myself to pay respects to Kalinga Jina. You must come with us."

"But we prefer to travel through the forests."

"There is a dense forest full of elephants and tigers on the way to Tamralipti too. If you go with us, you can enjoy the dense forest route as well as sea travel Tamralipti onward."

I did not say either 'Yes' or 'No' to him yet but the next day Simha Verma told me that the merchant is getting ready to go with his entire family and us to pay respects to the Jina at Kalinga Pattan.

Our journey had been smooth so far, so rest assured, we were fast asleep. Gazing at the stars scattered over a clear black sky the navigator was guiding the ship. Except for a few sailors the entire crew too was deep in sleep. Suddenly the ship jerked to one side and most of the people sleeping in the ship rolled over. I woke up to see the ship caught in the middle of a raging storm. Huge waves, as high as the mast of our ship were rocking us from all sides. On the deck itself people were running around in panic. The ropes attached to one side of the mast had broken loose and the ship was getting pulled into the opposite direction. The sailors were trying to steady the ship but the constant rocking of the ship by huge waves, darkness and the utter chaos on the deck was making it impossible for them to do anything. The ship itself had tilted to one side and the sailors were shouting to people, asking them to run over to the other side. But nobody could hear a thing over the noise created by the angry waves and the cacophony of the crew members' cries themselves. None of the sailors noticed that the ship was approaching a rock. Then there was sudden deafening bang! I was standing on the deck a moment ago and in the next I found myself flung into the sea, among the waves. I started swimming. For some while I could hear the noises from the ship but soon everything went quiet. Where am I ? I had no idea.I could be in the middle of the sea, may be I was very far away from the shore. Then what was the point of swimming? But I thought it would be cowardice to give up on life so fast. I must try to live till the last moment. If I am to drown, I would not go down without putting

up a good fight. So I kept swimming. Because I had no idea about which direction I was headed to, I thought there was no point in throwing arms and legs about. I decided to conserve my energy till the time I approached the shore. In the north, four out of the seven stars of Saptarshi constellation had already sunk below the sea; when the rest four too sank beneath the sea level it would be dawn. The storm had passed. The waves that had been flaying me up and down were gone now. I was lying flat on the calm water, floating as one would over the placid surface of a tranquil lake. Something solid hit my leg. It was a wooden plank over which I could stretch my legs. The ship had wrecked very far off from any shore, what good could this plank do for me, I began to think- "at the most it would probably keep me alive thirsty and hungry for a few days more in this desolate ocean". I shut my eyes and went into a stupor; then I saw myself lying on the same plank for ages, life gradually draining out of my body. First my legs, then my waist and finally my heart stopped and then there was darkness all around. And then I saw some crows sitting over my dead body, snapping at it to eat mouthfuls of flesh.

I must have fallen asleep because I cannot remember anything except for this.

I was awake now but did not want to open my eyes yet. I thought that it might still be night and no good could come out of gazing at this vast ocean; watching its hopelessly vast and desolated expanse could only bring depression . But then bright rays of the morning sun began to trickle through my shut eyelids. When I opened my eyes I saw that the stars were gone and the sun was shining over a clear blue sky. I sat up suddenly feeling my energy come back and hopes rising. I stood on the plank but could see no signs of life in any direction. Having quenched its hunger with so many lives, the sea had become calm now.

I lied down on the plank and began to try and row it towards the shore with my hands and feet.

I stepped on the sand and wrung seawater off my long hair. Barely any clothes were left on my body. I ran my hand over my waistline and was much relieved to feel the bag carrying a hundred dinars still tied to it. Now I felt anxious for my co-passengers. I could not decide whether I should walk towards north or south but set off towards north anyway. After walking about two miles I saw a wooden board floating up and down by the shore. That the wooden board was a part of some ship was beyond doubt but how could I be certain that it had come from same ship as ours? Despite this I was beginning to feel hopeful once again and started walking briskly in the same direction. I came across more bits and pieces from our ship. And then I saw a dead body by the shore. Alarmed that it

might belong to someone I knew I quickly checked the face. It was our merchant friend. He could not be expected to swim for too long; his body was heavy and he had swallowed so much water before drowning that his belly had bloated up. Seeing his dead body was very upsetting but I had not given up on my hopes of finding Simha Verma alive yet. As I walked ahead I came across several more broken parts of the wrecked ship. I saw more dead bodies, but except for the merchant's wife none of them were my acquaintances. When I could see no sign of Simha Verma after walking two miles more, desperation began to get better of me. A long way off from the shore there was a line of palm trees. I went near them but there was no sign of any human settlement there. I began to feel bad about not having learned climbing palm trees. There were acacia trees too, apart from cactus and other thorny shrubs, so I thought it better to walk on the sand as I was barefooted. Up ahead there was a banyan tree. I considered climbing over it to observe from a height whether there was any sign of a human settlement closeby. As I approached it I saw some small huts built by its side. Upon reaching closer to them, some dogs leapt at me barking.

Though my clothes had dried up, from the condition I was in, it would not have been difficult for anyone to gauge that I had been stuck by some mishappening. Hearing the dogs' barks some women emerged from the huts and chased them away. Then they began to say something to me in a language that was incomprehensible to me. 'Had I reached some remote island?' But before the storm hit us, the sailors had been absolutely certain about the direction in which we were headed, neither had our ship been sailing too far away from the coastline. Then how could I have reached some island? Upon their dark skins they had just one small piece of cloth on, wrapped around their waists. Above their waists they wore nothing and tied their long black hair into neat buns. They were wearing a number of bronze bangles on their wrists and necklaces made of shells, cowries and stones hung from their necks. Something hanging from their ears stretched up to their shoulders. I had heard many stories about strange islands. When I was small Kulupa would tell us stories about ogresses' islands. A shipwrecked sailor landed on the island's shore only to find himself surrounded by five hundred ogresses who made him their prisoner forever. I began to wonder whether this was one such island, but in this case there were just three ogresses instead of five hundred.

They made a hand gesture to me to follow them into one of the huts. I was reminded of the fact that apart from spoken words humans possess another language. I gestured towards the sea and then put my hand on my chest and was beginning to try and tell them more but they were already

moving towards the hut. The huts were very small. Their roofs were built out of twigs and palm leaves. Standing at the door of one the huts they gestured me to enter it. A number of odious thoughts immediately rushed into my mind. Though I had no belief in ogresses, I knew it for a fact that if it suited their selfish ends, humans could be much worse than the scariest of imaginary creatures. If I entered the hut and they shut the door from outside then I would become their prisoner. Who could tell what sort of ideas they had on their minds, they might even kill me! So I stopped at the door and put my right hand on my mouth. It seems that the gesture for eating-hunger is the same in all parts of the world. The two elderly women among them began to talk to each other and went inside one of the huts. The younger one, barely out of her teens, was left behind with me. This dusky beauty's body, it seemed to me, had been carved to perfection in a mould. Her two unconstrained breasts resembled coconuts and without doubt there was something alluring about her big wide open eyes staring at me. She looked nothing like the scary ogresses I had heard about in childhood stories about strange islands. 'It wouldn't be a bad idea to be her prisoner', I thought. I bent my head and entered the hut to see what I had least expected; I saw Simha and his beloved Vasanti lying on the floor, fast asleep upon a mattress made out of Palm leaves. Except for the gentle heaving of their chests they were lying completely motionless. I suppressed the wild run of my imagination now. If the extraordinary sequence of events since I left Patliputra were a dream then probably this entire life was a waking dream. I sat down on the floor. The dusky beauty too now came and sat down in a corner. In somewhile the elderly women arrived too, they had brought two earthen bowls. One had soupy rice and the other contained water.

I was feeling very hungry by now, despite my apprehensions I couldn't say no to this humble food that had been offered to me. I took a morsel of the thick soupy rice in my mouth, it had both salt and some fish. I finished the entire bowl and drank water. As I put the two bowls in front of the two elderly women, they said something to the dusky beauty and left.

Now I felt relieved. My dear friend and his beloved were alive and sleeping before my eyes. And I was no longer thirsty or hungry. I began to feel that I could sit there and watch these motionless sleeping figures forever. There was nothing else to do, neither was there anything to think about. My eyes fell upon the dusky beauty, but we did not understand each other's languages so neither of us spoke. I looked at her pretty face for a moment and then looked away but she kept gazing at me without any sign of awkwardness on her face. Swans were stitched over my garment. The dusky beauty looked at it curiously and then she came and sat very close

to me to examine it better. She gestured towards the sky, said something and then began to laugh. In some while I began to lose my initial hesitation as well. She then began to rub my clothes with her fingers and feel the smoothness of the fabric. I too touched her garment, it was woven out of some course material. I thought, 'It is impossible for we city dwellers to be spontaneous like her or to imitate her carefree laughter or her gaze devoid of an iota of hesitation or awkwardness.

It seems now that the two of us sat there for ages, trying to read each other's minds, trying to converse through our mute language. And then Simha began to move; he opened his eyes. I leaped towards him. He stood up and then we kept hugging each other several times without speaking a word. I spoke first- "Friend Simha! Is this not our second birth?"

"And such a sweet rebirth! Companionship of my dearest friend and the gift of youth right at the moment of being reborn! The dusky beauty was once again gaping at us, apparently trying to make sense of our burst of emotions. Our conversation woke up Vasanti too. She gasped and began to try and hide her body with her few remaining clothes. I said- Bhabhi ! (sister-in-law), you will have to unlearn most of what you have learnt so far. Consider it all to have been washed off by the seawater. Try for instance to learn something from this young lady sitting before us.

Vasanti smiled but did not stop trying to adjust her clothes. Like me, the only clothes they were now left with were the ones they were wearing. I did not think it wise to mention the death of our merchant friend and his wife, as yet.

There were various issues that needed to be sorted out. The most important task at hand was to know where we had landed. But how could we find out, when we did not understand a word of their language.

I asked- "Simha! Have you eaten anything?"

"No I have not and I am feeling hungry now."

Even while we were having this conversation I noticed that the same soupy rice and water had already been served in the same utensil in which I had eaten some while back. I said to Vasanti- "There is no need to be shy Vasanti dear! It is our good fortune that at least these few clothes are still left intact over our bodies, for all you know we could as well have emerged from the ocean in our birthday suits. This dusky beauty here can be your mentor in teaching you how to unlearn your modesty.

Vasanti smiled. And I noticed that the dusky beauty too had begun to smile for some reason.

I spoke again- "Friend Simha! Forget everything else for now and eat the food that has been served for you. It has nothing except rice, salt and

fish but I am ready to swear this, I have never eaten tastier food, not even at the imperial kitchens."

The earthen dish was put before Simha Verma; it was not beyond Vasanti's reach but she would not put her hand inside the bowl. I said- "Bhabhi! I am taking too many liberties, if I say something that hurts you please be generous because it is customary for Bhabhis not to mind their Dewars' (brother-in-law) words. The three of us know that you are as good as brother Simha's wife and the dusky beauty here and her kin have no reason to doubt this; so why do you hesitate from eating from the same bowl as him? Stretch your hand without hesitation and tuck in this splendid dish. Do you expect these poor villagers to serve you in a separate dish?"

Simha held Vasanti's hand and put it inside the dish. While she was putting the first morsel into her mouth, her neck tilted ahead and her big eyes stole a glance at me. While painting her portrait and otherwise too I had seen her several times. Though her eyes were red and her face displayed signs of fatigue, I think she had not ever looked prettier than she did at that moment. I said- "Bhabhi! Keep casting your benevolent glances upon me, and this humble slave of yours is ready to roam the wilderness with brother Rama and Sita like Lakshman forever."

Simha said- "Do not push it Jai! Do not make the mistake of thinking that your Bhabhi will keep quiet like this forever. Thank your luck that she is still keeping quiet because once she starts speaking you would be lost for words. Vasanti nodded her head in approval.

Into the Childhood of Humanity

After lunch Simha narrated his part of the story. When the ship hit the rock they were both plunged into the sea. For the first few frantic moments death had seemed inevitable to both of them. But then he held Vasanti's hand. Vasanti seemed to have given up but Simha's firm grip steadied her nerves and she held on. However, there were moments when they felt that neither of them could survive. In the darkness of night it was impossible for people to see each other. Simha could find Vasanti because they had slept side by side. Even if it had been broad daylight the two lovers would not have cared for the worldly morality in what they believed were the last moments of their lives. Simha made Vasanti sit piggyback over him and let their bodies become one.The next moment they found themselves in the sea; in all probability they would not have survived if both weren't such good swimmers. Simha said- "Jai! The moment we fell into the water,

for some reason we felt our fears draining away. I remember our falling into the water holding each other tightly, but the moment we hit the water, we left each others' hand and began to swim. For some brief moments I parted with Vasanti but then I called out to her and she again came near me and began to swim alongside. I asked her to hold my belt with her left hand. Like this, side by side we kept swimming for hours. Then hopelessness and fatigue began to overwhelm us. I stopped flaying my limbs about and let my body afloat motionless on the water and asked Vasanti to do the same. The scary silence that came about in the sea after the storm passed away did us one good, it let us feel each other breathing; that gave us the strength to keep going. We had to swim a lot, I am surprised that we could escape that ordeal alive at all."

Seeing Vasanti silent I said- "Did you notice Bhabhi, from his story it appears that he singlehandedly played the part of your saviour."

Vasanti laughed and now spoke for the first time- "Men are boastful by nature."

"But Bhabhi! Men could become like this only because women allow them to be so."

"Jai! I beg to differ with you here, but let me finish the story first. I know as much that then I was feeling responsible for Vasanti and this redoubled my will to fight till the end. Of course fatigue was sapping our energy and our limbs were beginning to resist our commands but we did not let our will to live fritter away. And then my feet touched sand. I stood up in neck deep water and holding Vasanti's hand asked her to sit upon my shoulders."

"Come on brother Simha! Stop posing as Bhima, or let me find the right person, you are Kumbhakarna to whom all the water in the seven seas is knee deep. And this is why Draupadi trusted you."

"No Jai...." saying as much Vasanti stopped herself mid sentence.

"I said-"Do not stop Bhabhi! Of course you can talk frankly to your Jai."

"Ok, Jai! When I got to know that we were very close to the shore, I too tried to stand up, but the water was still somewhat deep for me and my head went underwater."

"So that is why Draupadi had to seek Bhima's shoulder to sit upon."

"That is not true, I wanted to swim through the rest of the distance but Simha forced me to sit upon his shoulder."

"So brother Bhattaraka! You forced her to let you become Bhima. I wish I were there to see Bhima valiantly carrying Draupadi out of the sea.

Actually I think Mahavaraha would be a better epithet for you than Bhima, because if I am not wrong Vishnu saved the world from the sea in his Mahavaraha incarnation."

"You are right Jai! He was so eager to play the Bhima or Mahavaraha then. All his fatigue disappeared and suddenly he developed a sense of humour."

"Why should I not have developed a sense of humour Jai! Some are naturally humourous like you and the rest like us discover humour when we are very happy. You can understand what sort of state I would have been in if I had to emerge from the ocean without her by my side. I had jumped to certain death with the love of my life attached to me like a part of my own body and is it not so sweet that we emerged to life too attached to each other like one. Humans experience things first and find words to describe them only in retrospect."

"Bhabhi, how did you feel when brother Bhima emerged from the ocean with you sitting on his shoulder."

"I was looking towards the east, into the the face of the rising sun."

"You mean the dawn of life and the immense pleasure of being alive."

"Simha Verma finished his part of the story with- "As we stood upon the warm sand, faint red light of dawn was emerging on the eastern horizon. We were still panting. We saw these palm trees but thought it better to rest a while before exploring. The rest of the story is not too long. We were still resting on the sand when a few men approached the shore with fishing nets; one among them brought us to this hut."

"And you were fast asleep here when I reached."

"Now tell us about your experience Jai!"

"How sweet are these words coming from you Bhabhi! I wish I were the one to jump into the sea with you. Then brother Simha would have to satisfy himself by playing the role of Yudhishthira. My story is exactly the opposite as yours. You had your sleep here in the hut whereas my bed for the night was Vishnu's serpent in the sea."

Vasanti laughed at this. Simha Verma said- "You mean to say that you caught hold of some big wooden plank and instead of swimming like us, you spent the night sleeping over it."

"Brother Simha! You think I could stoop so low."

"In the eyes of your Bhabhi you mean? Why should I be happy being Bhima while you paint yourself as the god who sleeps on the sea serpent?

Why don't you just accept that you gave up on your limbs and instead of swimming let a lifeless wooden plank and the sea waves decide upon your fate."

"Brother Simha! Do not unmask me thus in Bhabhi's presence."

"Your Bhabhi is not so stupid Jai, that she would accept whatever your brother says. I have heard from father about your bravery in fighting off the Shabars in the forest."

"But Bhabhi! I am not selfish like him, let me concede as much, brother Simha was as brave as I was in that battle."

"I am not saying that your brother is not brave, but I know that you are not a coward either."

"But Vasanti! I did not achieve that feat alone, brother Simha was my equal partner in accomplishing it."

"I never said that your brother is not brave and I know that you aren't a coward either. I am sure you had a good reason to lie down on that wooden board instead of trying to swim to the coast."

"Excellent Vasanti! A line of two spoken in your flattery and it did not take you even two hours to begin siding with Jai."

"No brother Simha! Vasanti is right. Let me narrate what happened. I had lost all sense of direction, it was impossible to gauge which way the coast lied. I was afraid that if I keep on swimming, instead of heading towards the shore I might move in the opposite direction. In that case my courage would have taken me not towards life but straight into the jaws of death. Now I am not saying that what you accomplished wasn't brave, but you were lucky that you swam towards the coast."

"And our dear Jai, chose to use his head instead of surrendering to the blind forces of fate."

"To cut a long story short, instead of worrying about what fate might have in store for me, like lord Vishnu I kept sleeping, lying upon that wooden board in the middle of the ocean. Next morning when I woke, the shore wasn't too far. Then I swam up to it and upon landing headed north. On the way to here, I saw several broken pieces of our wrecked ship and some corpses as well. In the end I climbed this tree here to observe the surrounding and saw these huts. The dark skinned beauty (Shyama) and her two friends saved me from the dogs and then I saw the two of you sleeping peacefully."

I chose not to tell Vasanti about the death of her parents because I felt she wasn't ready to receive the blow yet. I waited for some days for her to regain her composure and finally when I told her, she kept crying for

many days. Both Simha and me had to make a lot of effort to make her smile again.

We were very curious to ascertain our location but we couldn't understand a word of their language. One evening all the denizens of the village returned from their hunt and farms and the hamlet began to gleam with small lamps once again. The village chief invited us to his house. A number of village men and women were also present there. They wanted to ask us questions but because we did not understand their tongue the conversation could not proceed at all. Later, in the evening the entire village got together to enjoy rice beer. The beer was kept in earthen pots and everyone had small cups made out of palm leaves to pour it into. Shyama and her friends had surrounded Vasanti and they were insisting her to have some of the beer. Vasanti acted wisely and compiled, our condition was precarious and we did not know for how long we would have to stay among these half naked people; offending them would not have been a very good idea. Along with beer, fish roasted over fire was being served which we devoured with a great deal of relish. As soon as it began to get dark, drums and flutes began to play. Young men and women of the village kept dancing till late into the night. Their dance steps were very simple and uncomplicated but I desisted from jumping into the arena at once. I requested Shyama to be my instructress and she managed to teach me all their dance steps within a few days. Meanwhile I had begun to play my flute along with them from the very second day. My playing the flute had already drawn them closer to me, but when I entered the arena in a few days time and managed to match all their steps without faltering, I think they accepted me as one of their own, regardless of the colour of my skin.

The third day I borrowed a piece of their coarse cloth from Shyama and tied it across my waist with a piece of cloth like they did. Then I tied my old clothes in a bundle and appeared before Vasanti. Seeing me dressed like that she burst out laughing but I also noticed astonishment in her eyes. I dropped the bundle on the floor and took out the small bag in which I was carrying a hundred dinars. "I will answer to your queries later but first hide these dinars somewhere, preferably bury it somewhere, it would come of some use in future. I can see that you have already taken off your gold necklace, that was wise thing to do."

The three of us headed for the dry sand by the shore. I asked Vasanti to take off the rest of her jewellery as well. Though she had lost most of her possessions to the sea, some fairy from the nag lok might have claimed them by now. But now she was hesitating from taking off the ones she was left with. I tried to reason with her- "Not taking them off and hiding them safely might cost us our lives you know."

"Thank the heavens that you could muster the courage to rid yourself of these jewels, but there is still a lot that you need to rid yourself of."

"And what is that?"

"See how I have freed myself of my clothes."

"Good going Jai! Vasanti dear do you hear what he says? This is your reward for siding with him."

"If he says so then I am sure there must be a good reason to it. I always take Jai seriously."

"Is that so? If Jai's words do indeed carry a divine sanction then who am I to intervene. Let your majesty also free herself from clothes, then this humble servant too would be forced to take the cue."

"Do not make fun of what I am saying brother! We do not know for how long we might have to stay here among these people and it would not be advisable to leave the company of these friendly folks and wander about in this unknown wilderness. You wish well for Vasanti, don't you?"

"Me her wellwisher? No Jai, heavens know that you are the only one who wishes well for her."

"Listen Vasanti! Brother Simha isn't such a simpleton as he pretends to be. He is trying to keep aloof from the discussion because he secretly hopes that I am able to convince you to rid yourself of your clothes and assume the attire of the dark skinned women here."

"Very clever of you Jai!"

"That we will see brother. Ok Vasanti, you tell me, how long do you think these clothes that you are wearing might last?"

"Five to six months." Said Vasanti, now getting somewhat serious.

"And brother Simha, pray tell, how long do you think it might take till we are able to reach our own people?"

"You are the seer here. Why don't you tell us?"

"I am no seer, but I cannot see any hope of getting out of this place for next six-eight months or may even an year. And brother Simha, by then Vasanti's clothes would wear off. What would you advise her to wear then?"

Simha was silent and Vasanti too began to think. I said- "Vasanti, I am not saying that you must begin wearing their clothes right away, but you will have to gradually get used to it before your clothes wear off."

"Jai! Your arguments are based on facts but...,"

"But! In fact there is a big but. Habits passed on and learnt through fifty generations may not be shed in a day but in about a months time most of our older customs would begin to seem meaningless. And I am sure that our Vasanti would be able to ready herself to accept the change."

"And what happens of your brother Simha?"

"Brother Simha would have to learn to accept the change right away."

"What makes you so confident about that Jai?"

"What other choice do we have brother? You think your paintbrush would help us here? Our new friends here can hardly be expected to patronise art. And their hospitality would not last beyond a day or two. There is no way to tell whether our dinars would help either. So the only way out is to work the fields like they do. They might not know the use plough but I am sure they would not mind some extra hands in digging the fields with spades. I know it would not be easy in the beginning, we are not used to such hard labour in the fields but we aren't weak either. Within a week or ten days, with some effort and pain, I am sure we would prove to be as useful as them in the fields. And we would have to learn to fish too."

Simha quite overwhelmed with emotions by now held both my hands and turned towards Vasanti- "Did I not tell you? I do not praise our brother Jai in vain. He deserves every bit of it and more?"

"Of course I agree with you. I am as proud of our brother Jai's wisdom as you are, may even be more."

"If you are so proud of him then do you agree to work alongside them from tomorrow?"

"You need not lecture me, I have made up my mind. From tomorrow I will ask Shyama to teach me to work like them. At least I can cook rice and fill up water to begin with."

"And are you also going to adopt their attire?"

"I think brother Jai's advice is sound. I will do that too in due time. But what about you my dear citizen painter? Are you going to hunt and fish with them too?"

"Citizen painter has already gotten used to taking his lead from brother Jai. Today after sunset when people gather at the arena, both Jai and I would be present there dressed like one of them."

We lived at that village for almost an year. Except for our skin colours, we had become one of them. We worked on the farms, went hunting with them and participated in their drinking-dancing festivals. In fact soon I came to be recognized as one of the better dancers in the village. Vasanti

had become everybody's favourite due to her dedication towards the sick; she would often be seen serving them for hours at a stretch. If only our knowledge, habits and upbringing had been the same as theirs, I think we would found life at this idyllic village quite fulfilling and satisfying. But we would feel nostalgic about the lives that we had left behind; whenever we had time from work we would stand by the shore hoping that one of the ships passing by would notice us. We had no idea then that this stretch of the shore was notorious for its hidden rocks and reefs and no navigator dared let his ship pass by it. At times when we were at the forest picking firewood, we would climb one of the hills and look towards every direction hoping to get a clue about our location but we could not locate signs of civilization. Though one relief was that we were not a burden upon our hosts; in fact we were working very hard to make ourselves useful. Simha Verma and Vasanti were man and wife so they had been given a hut of their own. Since I was still unmarried, I lived in a bigger hut common to all unmarried men and women of the village. The only rule, by way of segregation between men and women was that men slept on one side of the hut and women on the other side. This was the common home for children as young as seven-eight years to men and women up to twenty four-five. There were hardly any restrictions over the intermingling of young men and women. Inside the hut not just men but often women too stayed almost naked. I could not but marvel over how much human sexual behaviour could vary from one social setting to the other. At the royal palace people seemed obsessed with sex, thinking and talking about it occupied a major part of their mental energy. But here it was scarcely mentioned or discussed. Though this did not mean that men and women here were not interested in sex but there was almost as much a preoccupation with it as probably eating good food. We all like good food, but most of us do not spend our days thinking and talking about it, these people seemed to have a similar attitude towards lovemaking. I would wonder, how this is so? The first possible reason that occurred to me is that women here are not dependent. Bound neither by their parents, nor the community, they are free to choose a partner of their liking. It is almost impossible for a young man here to force a woman to marry him. Nor can he lure her into marrying him by displaying his wealth, palaces, slaves, jewellry or any other comforts of the city life. The woman does not have to come over to his house to be a dependent homemaker. They are every bit as productive as men, working side by side with them and helping the village sustain itself. So what attracted men and women towards each other here? Good physique, beauty, being good at dancing and singing, dexterity at work were some of the things. We spent our days working in the fields and in the evenings, after meals, there would be dancing and

singing. I had by then managed to learn many of their songs. I enjoyed dancing more because along with being good entertainment, it is a good exercise as well. While one might get bored of other forms of entertainment that this village could offer, I felt I could never get bored of participating in their rhythmic communal dances performed to the beat of drum and the melody of flutes and their sensuous songs. It was simple, quite unsophisticated and yet charming. Obesity was rare among these hardworking people, most of the men were well built with thin waists and broad shoulders and chests. Women too were seldom fat, most of them in fact resembled Greek works of art—perfect distribution of muscles all over the body; neither too thin nor fat.

Within the common hut of unmarried men and women I had become quite popular now. If there was no singing-dancing at the big theatre of the village, we organized dancing in our own hut. If someday people did not feel like dancing, I would narrate stories to them. Stories I had heard from Kulupa in my childhood came in very handy on these occasions. Stories about morality or high philosophy would make them sleepy but if I started some story about demons, monsters or divine beauties they would listen with rapt attention refusing to go off to sleep until I finished. Young men preferred stories about bravery and love whereas children loved listening to ghost stories, the ones meant to scare and also the ones meant to overcome fear. One day I narrated the story of Arroyo and Delphi to them-´Arroyo was the most acclaimed singer of his country; none could match the sweet melodies that emanated from his throat. Whenever he picked up his flute, birds and animals too would swing to his tunes (because they were unfamiliar with string instruments I introduced Arroyo as a flute player). And his lyrics were so touching that they could make estranged lovers fall in love all over again. Once he went to a grand musical festival at some island. He desired nothing except bringing honour to his wife and himself. Arroyo's songs and his flute won everybody's heart.

It was difficult to make them understand why people desire money; they had never seen money in the form of gold-silver, so I changed Arroyo's story into Tithonus' tale and continued— "But all the applause he got from his audience meant nothing to him because Delphi, the ethereal beauty present among them, had said nothing in praise of his music. He kept staring at her dark shining body, her long black hair and her big eyes, as he drank her beauty in and out came the most beautiful lyrics ever composed, which he sang, lost in rapture. But the beauty still did not say anything; this saddened Arroyo so much that he lost consciousness— his flute fell from his hands and he collapsed. When the festival got over artists began to return to their own countries but Arroyo would not go. He fell ill and

gradually his face began to fade. Arroyo could not hold his flute steady any longer because it seemed like a snake to him the moment he tried to take it into his hands. All the people—both men and women who had listened to him sing, came to him and told him that he was an exceptional singer and that they loved him. But nothing could comfort Arroyo; his eyes were searching for the beauty Delphi, but she did not come. Nobody expected Arroyo to live anymore. Somebody went and informed Delphi about his condition, so at last she came to see him. Arroyo had become very weak by then, all his muscles had wasted away. When he saw the girl, his smile returned and eyes shined. It seemed as though he might live but the next moment he died."

Shyama was unmarried so she too lived in the common hut. She was more talkative than the rest and it was mainly due to her efforts that I had managed to pick their language within eight-nine months. She looked dejected as she said- "A woman would have to be stony hearted to treat a man like that."

I said- "Who knows? Beneath our delicate bodies we have bones as hard as stones, it is possible that some have hearts like stone."

Vasanti had by now got used to being dressed like Shyama and the rest of the women in the village. Vasanti and Shyama looked like two perfect pieces of artwork; one carved in white and the other in black. One day we had gone to a nearby hill to pick firewood. There was no way to tell what month was it. During nights I would try to gauge what time of the year it was by observing constellations around the moon. This was probably spring. The forest was brimming with colours of flowers in full bloom. We had already gathered wood and settled down underneath a tree to rest and take in the beauty of the forest. Simha thought of something and then began to pick flowers, I helped him. After we had collected a basketful Simha said- "Bhattarika, allow your slave to adorn you with flowers today."

"And I would say Bhabhi! If brother Simha could adorn your portrait with his paintbrush so well then it is natural that he would be even better with real flowers."

Vasanti smiled and said- "So you will adorn me with forest flowers?"

"Yes, Vanadevi (goddess of the forest)"

"And I feel like carving a statue of the Vanadevi, once she is fully adorned with flowers."

"Statue? Jai! I haven't touched my paintbrush in ages, at times I feel scared that I might forget my art altogether."

"I feel scared too brother Simha! But fortunately my tools aren't difficult to arrange for. I have already made three iron chisels and there is stone all around."

"So then?" I looked at Vasanti.

"So then what?"

"I need her permission."

"As if you had taken permission before making her portrait at Suhm."

"She was not my sister-in-law then."

"Vasanti interrupted Simha mid sentence- "What portrait are you talking about? How is it that I do not know about it?"

"Err...Yes! Do you remember that I gave you two pictures, one real and the other imaginary?"

"Yes?"

"The portrait was painted by your brother-in-law Jai and the imaginary one was mine."

"And you took credit for both?"

"Because Jai asked me to do so."

"Oh! but Jai! What are you asking my permission for?"

"I want to cast Vanadevi in stone."

"But I have an issue Jai!"

"What issue brother Simha?"

"That you might turn my Vanadevi into a lifeless stone idol. And you need not worry about what these villagers would say either; you can just go back and tell them that she touched some magical herb and turned into stone, most of them would believe you."

"But I would still be alive."

"You do not know Jai, he might as well convince them that this is not you, but someone else."

"But you would still have me."

"Yes I would still have you but there is one more reason why you should not feel happy about Jai casting you into stone; he would imitate you ditto in stone and then this rustic undergarment that you wear by way of clothes would get inscribed with you in stone till eternity."

"Listen to me Bhabhi! Of course I intend to inscribe the beauty of Vanadevi the way it exists now—long black hair and forehead adorned with the heavenly flowers woven together, these pretty ears sans earrings

and yet beautiful, these artistically formed cheeks, these round shoulders with twigs wrapped around..."

"Let me help you Jai- 'And these well formed, round and fully visible breasts, this thin waist and these exceptional thighs barely covered by this rustic coarse undergarment carelessly wrapped around your waist.' It seems to me Jai that merely feasting your eyes upon Vasanti is not enough for you and now you want to ensure that her naked beauty is carved into stone for you and everybody else to gape at and admire forever."

"I do not see a harm in that."

"If both of you agree then who am I to object."

"Brother Simha, I want to carve you as well, by the side of Vanadevi! And why are you so worried? Nobody would figure out whose images are carved upon these black rocks."

"I will agree on the condition that you carve yourself as well beside the two of us."

"But how would I see myself?"

"See your reflection in water."-Vasanti said.

"This humble slave will try his best to see to it that Vanadevi's desires are respected. And when people see these carvings they would think that Ram, Lakshman and Sita had passed this way during their exile."

I could not have asked them to sit before me for me to carve their statues. The statues would not be complete for at least four months and I did not want to draw undue attention to what I was doing. So I made three small clay statues first as models to be imitated. And then I would visit the spot with my chisels and work on a piece of rock whenever I had time."

"Vasanti's statue was already complete and I was busy giving finishing touches to Simha's statue when I noticed two eyes observing me from behind the bushes. When I looked that way the eyes tried to avert my gaze but I knew who was it. I called out- "Shyama!"; "Yes", came the reply.

I asked her to come and sit next to me. For past some days Shyama had been curious about where I went with my chisels everyday and finally she had managed to discover my little secret. Shyama was now staring at Vasanti's image. I asked her- "Who is this?"

"This is sister Vasanti, but the colour is different."

"I cannot put colour into the image Shyama; I would be God if I could do that. Did you tell anyone about what I am doing here?"

"No, I have not . But I get bored alone, so I came looking for you."

"And you found me. So what can I do for you?"

"I want to see how you make people out of stone."

"I do make people out of stone but stones out of people; if people were not there then these images too would not be there. Shyama! Do you want me to make an image of you here?"

"You can make me as well? But I am Shyama!"

"Do not worry about that, but you would have to come everyday."

So Shyama began to come with me everyday. I started carving her face carefully, every time I looked at her I saw aspects of her beauty that I seemed to have missed earlier. I would look at her face and work on stone with chisels but she stared at my face continuously. When I carved her eyes, partly flushed with my success and partly because she was so pretty, I could not control my emotions. I said- "Shyama! Your eyes are very pretty."

"I cannot see them myself."

"But I can, and they are beautiful. Can I kiss them?"

"She brought her face close to mine. I gently kissed her eyes. She too kissed my eyes and said- "Jai! You look so good. I have been in love with you for so long."

"But you never told me Shyama?"

"At our village women do not say it themselves."

"Have I offended you?"

"It is not unusual for men to feel shy."

"I won't be shy anymore."

I had asked Simha and Vasanti not to come there; I had told them that they should come only when the three statues were ready. But Vasanti could sense that Shyama and me were drawing close to each other. One day she said- "Jai I would be very happy to see you married."

"How could I get married at this village Vasanti?"

"Because I like to see you happy and I can see that you are quite happy nowadays."

"Have you ever seen me unhappy before?"

"I have not, but I can see that you have been happier than usual lately. And, I think I have found out a suitable wife for you."

"It's a good thing that you found a girl of your liking to be my wife. Simha and I would have hated to see the two of you fight each other all the time.

"May be women from Patliputra love to fight, but the one I am talking about is not like that, and you like her too."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that very soon you are going to leave the common hut and build a hut for yourself and your wife next to ours."

"Are you suggesting marriage? But Vasanti you know how different these people are from us. They are black but not slaves. They do not accept anyone to be superior to them. Whatever we decide has to be in accord with their customs."

"Do not worry Jai! I have already persuaded Shyama's mother. Most of the women in the village know that you like each other and they are eagerly waiting for a grand wedding celebration."

"But can women take such a decision on their own?"

"Shyama's father and other village elders have agreed too and your youth-hut friends are already getting over excited."

"Then what is your advice?"

"Would the coming full moon night be fine?"

"This village had never had occasion to deal with the fair skinned before; the elders and and Shyama's father did seem slightly doubtful about the wedding. These forest dwelling people had their villages far apart from each other deep inside the forests, but they did meet each other occasionally. It seems that the elders had heard some stories about the flaws of the fair skinned from their peers in other villages. Fortunately for us, we had come to a village that had never come into direct contact with the fair skinned. Had us landed at some village on the frontier of white skinned people's domain, a different sort of welcome would have awaited us.

The village elders and the rest of the villagers held a grand celebration that night. Shyama and me were declared man and wife in the presence of the whole village. We kept drinking and dancing till very late that night.

The entire village helps in building a new hut for a married couple and this takes just a day. Our hut was built next to Simha Verma's hut. Then Shyama and I entered it as man and wife. Vasanti said- "Had this wedding happened in the city, as your sister-in-law I would have been given the right to lead you into the new house with your newly wed."

"But Vasanti, because we are here you managed to appropriate all the rights of organizing the wedding which are usually reserved for family elders."

"What is this compared to the weddings in the cities?"

"And neither of us could get married in the city. Your wedding was mediated by the sea and mine by these palm leaves. But still, I would say

that weddings here are not wanting in love and festivities. In fact I feel that there is more mutual affection and bonding here; the spontaneity and naturalness of emotions that you see among them is not to be found among city dwellers. A number of cultivated city women tried to woo me but instead of love I saw lust and self interest in their eyes. And look at our Shyama here; she has none of the sophistication of city women but I fell in love with the simplicity and honesty of her emotions. Her unadulterated smile has a sweet appeal and attraction."

"And Jai! She seems to love you as much."

"I think at times, if there weren't so many disparities and differences between man and man, between men and women, among races and classes then our lives too could have been more transparent and unadulterated."

"So you desire that in the city too women should stay half naked and men should roam about bare-chested?"

"No Vasanti! I do not desire that humans should forget the knowledge and scientific know-how they have acquired over ages. Sculpture, painting and literature are so fulfilling. Our ability to build palatial mansions, wells, canals, pools make our lives easier. Books and the art of writing pass on our collective experiences and knowledge to the future generations. Forgetting all of these would mean setting the pace of time backwards, to return from the bloom of youth to the ignorance and helplessness of a child. Are not the denizens of this village in a similar stage of ignorance and helplessness? I have no love for their ignorance-helplessness, but I admire the sweeter aspects of their lives. How they bond with each other without avarice and seem ever ready to help each other? They are each others' companions in thick and thin. No kings and subjects, they are all equal. They seem like they belong to the same family."

"I like these aspects of their life too. But do not know which one to choose, our progress or their sincere collective lives."

"This means that to rid them of their ignorance and helplessness we will have to teach them our science-knowledge and arts; but what can assure us that having learnt these, they would also not turn out to be the same as us, city dwellers?"

"It is very much possible. But do you know that due to citizens' collective rule, in our republic we do not have to bow to kings-lords, we do not have to silently bear the insults of those who style themselves as rulers and neither are we forced to snatch the hard earned livelihoods of millions for the luxury and pomp of a few families. If like them we had made our farms, orchards and crafts-commerce collective then the difference

between rich and poor would not have come into being. No person who deprives the poor of their sweat of brow to fill his own coffers can ever be truly happy."

"But Jai! We always heard that the difference between rich and poor has existed since eternity."

"At Magadha too people say that kings have existed forever. But it is only eight hundred years since the powerful republic of Licchavis ceased to exist; among them there were no kings, people ruled themselves collectively."

"So you mean it is untrue that people who fulfil their religious duties with dedication, practise penances and go on pilgrimages are born into rich and eminent families."

"Without doubt it is not true. The authors of such religious books are either too naive to understand the machinations of the rich or they serve the rich an purpose for personal benefits and patronage. Look at this village, can anyone become rich here? They have farms, but it is the common property of the entire village. They are given plots of land to plough by the community. If a person cannot grow enough despite working on his fields, his neighbours make sure that he does not have to starve."

"I would be very happy if your ideas could come true Jai. Life here has its charms, I love its simplicity and spontaneity but I dislike their ignorance and helplessness."

"I agree with you."

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In about an year's time we had begun to speak and understand the language of the village fluently. Like them, their language too was simple. We still tried to figure out our location but the names of places they told were alien to us; we had neither read of them in our books nor had we heard anyone speak about them. Iron was the only item they bought from outside. The people who came to sell it were dark skinned as well. Upon being asked, they too would say that they got iron from people similar to them. Their ancestors had occasionally come across the dead bodies of fair skinned people from earlier shipwrecks. Even the eldest among the villagers had seen us, the fair skinned ones for the first time in their lives. We were losing hope that we would ever be able to return to civilization. At times we would consider accompanying the iron sellers to the place they brought iron from. But we were uncertain of being able to be together again if one of us left alone. And if all three of us left together then the villagers would be upset, particularly Shyama. But there seemed to be no other way out.

Back to the City

Of course at times we felt nostalgic about the lives we had left behind but I cannot say that we were unhappy at being there. Simha and me would work on the farms or catch fish along with the rest of the men. Shyama and Vasanti worked at the village. Vasanti had by now learnt to stitch the coarse fabric they wrapped around themselves into clothes. She would even use the expertise she had learnt growing up at the city to embroider beautiful patterns upon these clothes. Shyama and many other young women of the village gradually learnt it too. At times when there was no work young couples would go for walks into the jungle or the shore. We would decorate our wives with flowers and at times with shells. My flute would always be with me. I had no problems with the language anymore. I had read a lot of literature in Sanskrit and Magadhi. This language had much fewer words and forms compared to them, the style of making sentences was also very simple and straightforward. But I realized that simplicity of a language is no impediment in expressing deeper human emotions. It would be difficult to hold back tears when some youth hummed an old tale in lyrics composed by some unknown poet. A young man goes to the sea to fish. His small wooden boat is being rocked by a raging storm. There is no sign of fear on his face but every once in a while some thought fills his heart with melancholy. The lyrics of this unknown poet express his sentiments thus- "O Ocean! I am not afraid of death. O the Wind God! Do not think that your wrath can scare me. But my heart rends for my beloved who will ask the young men back from the sea- Where is my boatman? Where is my lover? None would be able to answer her, then O Sea! She will come to your shore, watch your undulating tides green and blue; and when she cries for her lost lover, even you would not be able to sleep peacefully."

By now we had begun to believe that our contented lives at this village would go on forever. Nothing could have made us imagine that one day it would suddenly come to an end. Had us been forewarned, we could have prepared ourselves for it. One fine afternoon five unfamiliar faces arrived at the village. They looked the same as our hosts—similar dark skins, a piece of coarse cloth wrapped around their hips, bird feathers of various colours on their heads, spears and bows in their hands and quivers hung on their backs. All the villagers came out to look at them. Shyama was lying down with her head on my lap. I was caressing her head with my fingers. Her eyes shut, she had a faint smile on her face. We were dreaming about our future; Shyama was expecting. I would say- "It's going to be a daughter but Shyama wanted a son who looked like me. I heard some men

talking loudly and looked in the direction in which the five men were headed. People were not alarmed; in its living memory the village had not witnessed any wars with the neighbouring villages. And if at all they wanted a battle, why would they send just five men? The five men were headed by a man who had more bird feathers on his head than the rest. He asked the first man he came across about something and then they reached the house of the village elder. For some while he kept talking to the village elder and some other prominent men of the village. Then after some time all the men in the village, except for me and Simha were summoned to a meeting. Though we had never been treated like this before, I still did not suspect that something untoward might occur. I kept talking to Shyama till late evening and then gradually went off to sleep. Though Shyama was in deep slumber, I was still half asleep when I heard some voices outside our hut. Three young men of our village, my closest friends were standing outside. They asked me to come along. They seemed on the verge of tears as they broke the bad news to me. They told me that the five men had been sent by the people of our race who lived in villages to the north. These five had come to inform that the villages in the north were under attack from the king of the fair skinned. 'Our villages are being burnt, men are being slaughtered and women and children are being carried away in chains. The entire black skinned race is uniting to fight off the fair skinned.' They further said that the villages to the north have learnt that some fair skinned are being our guests. Their message is- "Expel them from your village or be ready to be treated as the enemy by the entire dark skinned race."

The village had accepted us as one of their own; we had the affection of almost all of them so it was quite natural that they were very upset at being delivered this message. My three friends narrated the entire story to me, haltingly, taking breaks in between to express their anger, grief and frustration at being able to do nothing to save us. Finally, when they had told everything to me, they said that Simha and I had been summoned by the elders only to inform us of their final verdict. The village could not have gone against the entire dark skinned race. I woke up Simha and Vasanti and told them about everything that had happened. With heavy hearts we told Vasanti to be prepared to leave and then set out to meet the elders and the five outsiders who were present there. The newcomers were introduced to us by the elders and then their leader spoke to us- "Young men! From what we have heard about you from the people of this village, we have become convinced that you are in fact good men despite being fair-skinned; though I must add that this is highly unusual. Fair skin and gentlemanliness do not go hand in hand. They grab others' wealth, they covet others' forests and enslave women and children to treat them like

beasts of burden. They are liars and they do not respect the law of gods. The fair skinned are liars, all that is good in a human has got washed off from their person and so they have become fair. But you are innocent, you are not like the rest of the fair skinned. But still we can do nothing for you. In the north your kin are decimating our kind; armies are slaughtering our people. They seem hell bent on destroying our villages and lives completely. Can we remain silent and watch them finish off our kind? We heard about you from the people of this village. Everyone of them is sad for you. We are sad as well, but all we can do for you is to allow you to go towards the south, to the country of your own kind. On your way out from our land, you will meet a pathfinder at every village who will lead you to the next. Go towards south, do not stray too far away from the shore and you will reach the country of the fair skinned. Our people in the south have not yet heard of the war in the north, so you have no reason to feel threatened from them." Then he turned to Simha and said- "Go and fetch your wife, a man is ready to leave with you."

For me, this verdict was nothing less than a death sentence. Simha was very upset too but there was no other way out. We had loved them and received love from them in return but could not change our skin colours. Vasanti was waiting for us, upon hearing our footsteps, she quickly stepped out of her hut with all her clothes tied in a bundle.

I could not stop myself from stepping at the door of my hut. The moon had emerged from the clouds for some moments and it seemed to be casting a halo around her face. She was deep in sleep. I could not make out the outlines of her face in the dark but the sound of her slow rhythmic breathing reached my ears. There seemed to be a faint smile on her face. Perhaps she was dreaming. Some dream about our future together, the simple and happy life that we would have woven together. I wanted to kiss her one last time but I stopped myself. It was beyond my power to do anything about the situation. If she woke up, she would have insisted on coming along. The feelings of one young woman did not count for much in comparison to the decision of the entire dark skinned race. It is possible that we would have sacrificed ourselves for the sake of our love but what right did I have to condemn our two dearest friends to the same fate? And moreover what right did we have to seal the fate of the person yet to come before he had a chance to see the light to dawn? I said to myself- "Shyama! My simple sweet Shyama! Accept my farewell kiss. I leave you but your memories would always remain a part of me."

Our pathfinder was walking ahead of us with a small dried up palm stick in his hand. Apart from our bundle of clothes we had some dried fish and rice. We also had two bows, some arrows and I had taken along my

chisels and knife. By morning we had already walked about eight miles. We were sad and upset about losing our dear friends but we were also somewhat excited about being back among our people again. We were passing through a dense forest, on our right there were several small hills. We were under constant threat of being attacked by tigers and elephants but the dark skinned consider such dangers a part and parcel of their lives. After all their small huts located deep inside these dense forests seems like water droplets in an ocean. If they did not fear the fire, elephants would crush their small huts. It is the sharp mind of the dark skinned and their extra-ordinary fitness that lets them survive in these forests otherwise their bows, spears and axes would be of no use when faced with fierce wild animals who share their homes with them. By now we had become sufficiently used to hardships to be able to walk barefoot all day without caring for thorns and sharp edged pebbles in the dirt pathway."

After a day's walk we reached the next village. Our path finder took us to the village headman and handed over the dried stick to him. He welcomed us with rice beer and offered us food.

Travelling this way, from one village to the other, at last we reached the edge of the forest. Our pathfinder climbed a small hill and showed us a village located at a distance. Though the houses were somewhat different from what one would come across at Magadh, their high walls and clay tiled ceiling informed us that we had come out of the country of the dark skinned. Our pathfinder bade us farewell. I turned around to take a last look at the dense forest, which made me think of Shyama and my eyes began to well up again. I told Vasanti-

"Vasanti, we need to change our clothes. We cannot enter the village in this attire."

Vasanti took a deep breath and began to take out her old clothes. I too changed and said- "Had we entered the village dressed like the dark skinned, we would have been slaughtered."

"These people may be ignorant and helpless in many ways but they are not lacking in self respect. How sweet and simple had been their humble welcome for complete strangers like us? While we were there I would miss my homeland but now their sweet memories would live with me for the rest of my life."

This reminded me of Shyama again. She must be so upset ! What could give her solace? May be her people told her that we had gone somewhere for a few days and that we would be back shortly. But would she believe them? As I stood lost in these thoughts, Simha's voice brought me back to our present- "Jai! Let's go, this is a completely new country to us, we must reach before the sunset."

We reached a village much before the sunset. We looked conspicuous because we were dressed as the forest people, more so because we had really long beards by now. I tried talking to one or two people but they would not understand anything of what I said. Simha said- "I cannot understand their language either, but from one or two words that I could recognize, I can tell that they are speaking Andhra." We headed towards a raised platform, which as we drew closer to it turned out to be a temple. I was somewhat skeptical as I started talking to the priest there. Though he had a sacred thread hanging from his shoulder, his skin tone was almost the same as my Shyama. The priest answered my questions in a language which was not exactly Magadhi, but I could still understand him as it seemed somewhere in between Magadhi and Sanskrit. From what he told me, I gathered that the village was in the Kalinga country and the forest we had left behind belonged to the Shabars. I also found out that the city of Dantapur (Paloor) was not very far off from here. Upon our asking whether there was a place to stay nearby, he pointed towards an inn in the village.

It indeed seemed to us that we had reached a different world. Once again we began to experience cunningness, duplicity, artifice, artificial etiquettes etc of the civilized world, aspects of the civilized world that we had almost forgotten about in the past one year. We had a hundred dinars on us, so money was not an issue. I had heard of Dantapur before, the city was famous because one of Tathagata's teeth was preserved here. It was not difficult for us to guess that there would be a great number of Buddhist monks from whom we would be able to hear of the latest news from countries near and far. We were told that the road to Dantapur is safe and frequented by numerous caravans. The village had a market place which seemed somewhat big for the needs of this small village. It had numerous shops which sold iron tools and equipments like axes of various sizes, spears, arrow heads etc. We bought two swords, some new clothes and a few utensils to cook and eat in. The priest helped us with our purchase, in fact he even offered to cook for us. We paid him an advance sum to buy rice, meat, and other things required for cooking.

We got a lot of information about this country from the priest. The capital city of Kalinga Pishtapur (Pithapur) was far from this village. King Mahendra had died a few years ago, the new king was as good as his father. Most of the people in this country spoke a native language but within the royal clan, among brahmins and the aristocracy a different language, somewhat similar to Magadhi was spoken. I found this language to be very close to old Magadhi, the same as the one in which Acharya Vasubandhu had once given me stories to read. I had seen a similar language used in the old manuscripts kept at the Sinhala Vihar at

Mahabodhi (Bodhgaya). I could not speak this language chastely but people seemed to understand what I said, particularly if spoke slowly, breaking up my sentences. The priest's wife was fair like Vasanti. Very soon the two of them became good friends. Like all brahmin women here, she could speak both the languages fluently. Vasanti asked her one day- "Sister! Why is your husband dark skinned?"

"They say the sun is very harsh in our country. Because men have to be out in the sun more often than women, their complexion becomes darker."

Vasanti could barely stop smiling at the naivete of the brahmin woman; later she told me about what she had said to her. I asked Vasanti- "So what is your opinion about her reasoning?."

"One can get a tan through exposure to harsh sun but a fair skinned person cannot turn dark skinned."

"You are right, like the brahmins in the north, they too have pretensions of purity of blood. People in the north are relatively fairer because dark skinned are lesser in number, whereas in the south, because the number of dark skinned is more, the admixture of blood has given most of the people here a darker skin tone."

"But like our country, here too brahmins do not inter-marry with other castes?"

"They may not marry them but they can still cohabit with women from other castes."

"But still children born out of such a liaison would not be considered brahmins."

"Yes, it is true of a brahmin who sires a child with a woman outside his caste, but what about brahmin women?"

"What about them?"

"After all most brahmins keep a few dark skinned slaves and servants in their houses. Is it impossible that upset with the inadequacies of these pot-bellied, slothful brahmins, she might cast roving eyes upon the slaves-servants in the house?"

"Quite possible, I heard similar stories about some brahmin households in my city."

"So most probably our priest is a brahmin of the same kind. To be fair to him, one can at least be certain that he was born from the womb of a brahmin women, but about his father, the least said, the better."

I found it very curious that the decrees issued on behalf of the throne did not use the native language of Kalinga. Why would the king issue

instructions meant for the masses in a language that they cannot comprehend? Our own Parambhattaraka too was in the habit of issuing his copper plate instructions and rock edicts in Sanskrit. Though the people of Magadha could somehow comprehend them as their own tongue Magadhi was very close to Sanskrit, but I had no patience for these royal pretensions at all. Some of the elected leaders of the Yaudheya republic too had got a few inscriptions engraved in Sanskrit but for the day to day affairs of the state, we were in the habit of using the language used by the masses. The problem for the people of Kalinga was magnified manifolds as their native tongue was nowhere close to the language used by the king and nobles. Most of the latter are from north and they are trying to impose their own language upon their subjects. Later I observed at Dantapur that a number of families of pure Kalinga descent discourage the use of their native tongue within their households and encourage their children to learn to speak Sanskrit or Magadhi. Many hesitate to even acknowledge their Kalingan descent and devise elaborate genealogies to somehow prove that their ancestors had arrived from the countries to the north like Magadha, Kasi, Kosala, Panchala etc. These are the results of accepting kings from foreign lands but what I find most unfortunate is that the common people seem to accept that only royal families from north are capable of producing able kings.

We reached Dantapur after two days' walk. This is a big and prosperous city on the sea shore. We settled down at an inn attached to the Danta-Vihara. The three of us were adherents of three different religions. Simha Verma and his clan were the followers of the brahminical religion and Shaivism. Vasanti was born to parents who revered Arhat (Jina) and our clan had been Buddhist for many generations. Before our stay at the Shabar village possibly we all had some bias in favour of our religions but by now we had understood that human religions had been evolving with the development of human societies . Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism were in fact very late developments. In the beginning when I told Vasanti that I did not believe in the theory of rebirth, she had expressed reservations. But during our stay at the Shabars' village we had all observed firsthand that the thought of rebirth of humans did not arise naturally in the human mind. It seems natural to us only because this theory is shoved into children's minds since a very tender age. Shabars did not believe in rebirth. When Vasanti discussed this with me I told her "If Shabars were to accept this theory, things would become very easy for the kings. Then they would not feel inclined to lift their bows to fight off the kings believing that they have become kings due to their good deeds in their last birth. Poverty and affluence are explained and justified through the theory of past karma, good and bad."

Having observed freedom loving Shabars and their beliefs over past one year, it was easier for Vasanti to follow the import of my arguments. Now all three religions were the same to us. All three believed in rebirth and, therefore, in our opinion all three were guilty of implicitly justifying oppression and enslavement of man by man.

The next day we visited 'Danta Vihar' to catch a glimpse of Buddha's tooth preserved there. People come to this vihar for pilgrimage from far and wide. Which devout Buddhist would not want to catch a glimpse of what was once a part of Buddha's own living body? It is a grand temple built of stones—skilled artisans, craftsmen and sculptors have embellished it with exquisite pieces of art. Though this vihara cannot match the grandeur and wealth of Kanishka's vihara, it is quite apparent that sea merchants have done as best as they can in terms of spending money to ensure that the vihara is able to strike awe in the hearts of pilgrims. It has over fifty huge golden lanterns which burn twenty four hours a day continuously. Each one of these lamps is so heavy that only an exceptionally strong man can lift it. I read the inscriptions engraved upon them. Among the donors many were merchants from foreign lands, most of them being merchants from countries situated by the sea. The tooth was placed within several layers of golden caskets. These caskets were themselves studded with precious gems. The tooth is displayed for the public only on certain stipulated days of the month. On such days people queue up with folded hands to get a glimpse of the relic. As we stood there watching, Bhikshus removed the layers of boxes one by one and finally put forth the casket holding the tooth to the view of the devotees. I was astonished to see it but somehow managed to check myself from saying anything then. But by the time we returned to our inn I was shaking with rage and said-

"These shopkeepers of religion can stoop so low! It would appear that their shamelessness knows no limits."

Vasanti smiled and asked me- "Tell us something that we have not already heard from you before Jai!"

"Yes I keep saying this and let me say it again! Did you see 'Buddha's tooth?"

"Yes I saw, it looked so awe inspiring, placed within so many layers of gems studded golden boxes."

"Golden boxes glorifying an inglorious lie and meant to dim a person's ability to use his reason."

"At least say a word or two in praise of the skilled craftsman who carved them Jai!"- Simha said.

"I do not mind heaping praises upon skilled craftsmen for their art but do not expect me to take a lie silently."

"What's the lie?"

"So brother! Seems like you would always remain what you are— a naive artist."

"Rightly said Jai! I keep saying this to him as well."

"But will somebody please explain to me what the matter is before launching this combined attack upon me? 'I keep saying this as well', but did you even care to understand what Jai is trying to say?..."

I stopped him midway

"I am talking about the tooth that was shown to us by those charlatans, it could not have belonged to a mortal."

Vasanti was staring at me-

"Jai! Listening to you speak about Tathagata, I had begun to revere him."

"You need not stop revering him but I am not ready to accept blindly everything that is being bandied about in his name. And more importantly we cannot hold him responsible for the lies being propagated in his name by these scoundrels. It is possible that Buddha did believe in concepts like Nirvana and rebirth but he certainly did not claim, unlike the Tirthankaras that he is omniscient, master of all knowledge and philosophy. But in this case it is not reverence for Buddha that is in question, what we are talking about here is the use of religion by shopkeepers of religion to make it serve their narrow selfish ends; they have managed to get some below average artist to carve ivory or some sort of bone into the shape of human teeth and pass it off as Buddha's extant tooth. Had they hired a better craftsman he could have carved a good imitation of a slightly old, worn out tooth. But did you see this one? Four molars put together would not be as big."

"Jai! When I was small, I used to hear from the elders in my family that Buddhist philosophy isn't a true knowledge, that the Buddhist path is the path of sin; hearing such things I had developed a bias against it in my mind. But lately, listening to you speak about Tathagata, my perception about him had been changing and so today I worshipped the holy relic with all my devotion. But now you are once again shattering my beliefs."

"Did you hear that Jai! I keep telling you, women cannot think on their own, they are like helpless creepers always in the look out for something to hold on to."

"Yes, we are helpless creatures incapable of standing firmly on our own."- Isn't this what you wanted to prove Jai! Your turn will come some day."

"Seeing Vasanti's face go red Simha immediately hugged her and then pressing her fingers gently he said- "No my queen! If you are a creeper then Simha is a tree. The two cannot live apart from each other."

"You are right brother! Indeed a person incapable of standing on her own feet is free! Let me tell you brother, Vasanti is not a creeper incapable of standing on her own. But Vasanti! Why do you let his words hurt you? Brother Simha might be extremely skilled with the paintbrush but he is an imbecile with the gift of gab in an equal measure. Poor brother Simha! He wanted to make you happy and ended up saying something that hurt you all the more.Brother Simha! Let me say something to you—not participating in a friend's humour is rudeness but we ought to be careful in weighing each one of our spoken words with the same care as a goldsmith would display in measuring his gems."

"Jai! You are an amazing man. If you were not there, your sister-in-law would be perpetually playing cat and mouse with me."

"Did you hear that Vasanti! Who is the cat and who is the mouse?"

Vasanti laughed now and Simha hugged her.

"Then let me tell you, cats are these charlatans and swindlers who set traps for the naive. They have set up their shops everywhere— Brahmins' temples. Jain temples, Buddhist temples etc. and the poor masses—they are the mice."

We stayed at Dantapur for several days. Simha bought new brushes, canvas and colours. I too bought new chisels and hammers. But we did not start working as yet, as we had enough by way of savings.

One afternoon I was returning from the sea shore after a walk. On the way, I heard a beautiful tune emanating from a veena inside a house. I was listening to Veena being played so well after very long, so I stood by the door to hear. The deft performer plucked one note after another. I seemed to have lost the measure of time as I stood there listening attentively, oblivious of my surroundings, till a female voice reached my ears- "Arya! If you do not mind, please step in for a while and gratify this humble artist with your audience."

I was in such thrall of the music that I too wanted to meet the artist and convey my compliments, so I quietly followed the woman. She led me on into a big living room, a candle in her hand. The room had been tastefully decorated; in a corner over a bronze stand with elaborate carvings, a five flamed lamp was burning. I could tell from the aroma emanating from it that it was burning on incense mixed with oil. A lady was sitting in the room, gently inclined upon a cushion; upon my entering the room she

stood up to greet me. She folded all her ten fingers very gracefully in greeting and said- "Arya! Welcome!"

I sat down unable to decide who this lady might be or what she did. She was not very pretty but could not be called ugly either. She had very few ornaments on her but the few she wore suited her very well. A gold necklace hanging from her neck, small earrings, a pair of thin bracelets on her wrists and two-three flowers on her bun. I figured that she might be around twenty years old. I wanted to ask who she was but etiquette obliged me to say a few words in praise of her music first. With gratitude in my voice I said- "Dear lady, forgive me for standing uninvited at your doorstep but you play the Veena too well for a person to pass by without stopping for a while to appreciate your art. And now you have kindly obliged to grant me an audience, I am most grateful for this favour and apologetic for the inconvenience that I might have inadvertently caused your."

"You did not inconvenience me in the least Arya! In fact I am grateful that you arrived at my doorstep."

"It is after very long that I have had the privilege of listening to Veena being played so deftly. Since I left Patliputra I have not come across anyone whose fingers are so skilled at plucking such beautiful notes from strings."

"Arya! You are from Patliputra."

"I used to be, but now I am just a dried leaf, blowing in any direction the winds would take me."

"I learned to play the Veena at Patliputra. I had been sent there as the attendant of the prince of Pishthapur. The kind prince noticed my love and enthusiasm for music and encouraged me to learn it." Having said as much she gasped, as though in pain. I tried to console her-

"Dear lady! It seems that I am responsible for reminding you of some painful memory. Please forgive me, it was not my intention to hurt you."

"I will have to live with this pain for the rest of my life Arya! After his father's death, the throne should have been rightfully his, but every emperor's death is occasion for bloodbath among his sons. My prince's life was sacrificed in a similar bloodfest. Arya! You talked about being a dried leaf, I think this simile is more apt for my life than yours. This poor girl is now forced to roam the world without moorings, blowing in the direction her poor fate has determined for her. I do not want to make Arya's heart heavy with the sad tale of this slave girl's misfortunes; may be later, if Arya obliges I will narrate my life story to you. Probably the only way, this poor girl can welcome Arya's presence at her house is by playing music for him."

"Music is dearer to me than anything else."

So the young woman held the Veena and began to play, this time played it to the accompaniment of a song she sang. Since time immemorial, when confronted with the miseries of life, poets famous and unknown, have woven their sentiments into lyrics just as a skilled garlands would weave flowers of different colours. This was one such song, it would seem that the song had been composed specifically to suit her delicate voice. Her Veena too expressed agony. I am certain that the song would not have been the same and her voice would not have been as expressive had they not been emanating from the depths of her pained heart. After ending her song, the young woman spoke immediately without giving me the opportunity to compliment her- "Arya! You seem like a connoisseur of art. If it isn't too much of a trouble I would like to listen something from you. It is very long since I listened to Patliputra music."

Having just come back from the Shabar village I was yet to get used to the artificiality and etiquettes of the city life. So rather naively, I responded- "Of course I love music a lot but I have not had occasion to practise my art for some while. I would still like to play a Dwipadi for you." So I took the Veena from her hands and performed a spring Dwipadi. Now it is true that there is bliss in reuniting with one's lover, but ironically the songs of reunion are not so pithy as the songs of parting. In fact the longer the separation from one's lover, the sweeter the song. Audience too tend to empathize more with songs of valediction. As I was singing I noticed that the young woman's eyes were getting moist.

When the song ended she bowed her head, put some flowers at my feet and said- "Arya! It is a true saying that trees laden with fruits bow down in humility; great artists do not advertise their skills. When this humble servant was informed of a gentleman standing at her doorstep, she could not ignore his presence. Who knows what qualities a stranger at the doorstep might possess? I thought it might be a connoisseur standing in the dark to appreciate my art. I called you in because I thought no admirer should go back unsatiated. When I saw your dignified demeanour and humble attire I immediately felt that you might be a person of many qualities but I could never have guessed that the person in question could be such a great artist."

"Beauty! If I were to tell you that you are wasting your flowers by placing them at the feet of an undeserving person then I would be guilty of being insensitive towards your simple heartfelt feelings. I have been in love with the Veena and music since I was small. I have an instinctive attachment to art. But I am sure that you would have heard about the

immense stature of the 'great' artists at Patliputra, I certainly do not deserve to be referred as one."

The young woman wanted to know more about me, but all I told her was that the three of us had come to Dantapur for pilgrimage and that we were putting up at a nearby inn. I also told her that I have a brother who is a skilled painter. As I got ready to leave she said- "Arya! I am not so fortunate as to hope to be graced by your presence again. If you consider me worthy enough, please consider this house your own. But it is a sin to malign the moon. You are pure and I do not desire to defile you by forcing my company upon you. I am a dried leaf, a hapless woman forced to trade her beauty for a living to survive in this big cruel world. How could I request you to visit me again. I would have come by myself but a fallen creature like me cannot arrogate to itself that privilege either."

I was about to get up but upon hearing these words from her I sat down again. There was sadness on her face; she shifted uncomfortably as I sat down. I said- "Dear lady! I would not call a person criminal or sinner merely because our society pronounces them to be so. Though I admit that I do not know much about the plight that you had to go through, please allow me to say something. Earlier you had said that the simile of dried leaf applies more to you than me. You are right, no man could ever be a dried leaf, it is women only who must bear such a misfortune. Men treat women like playthings; they adore them when it suits them and unceremoniously throw them away when they so desire."

"Arya! So long as the prince was alive I did not understand this. He was a prince so he could not have been completely free of the vices that afflict men from royal houses but yet he was different in many respects. He loved the queen a lot and the queen was my benefactor. When the prince was murdered the queen too passed away. I tried to seek some other patron but at Pishthapur nobody trusted me anymore as I belonged to the house of the murdered prince. There was a vast world ahead of me, but I had nowhere to go. If I had not gone to live at the royal palace, if I had not become used to its etiquettes and manners and if I had not become as delicate as I am, then possibly I could have thought of becoming a common house servant at some simple household. I would not have been so conscious of my false sense of pride. Though humiliation of attendants is not uncommon at the royal palace either, it is generally not as unbearable as elsewhere."

"Is it because that humiliation comes from the kings, the queen and other royal scions?"

"Yes, like gods they bear full right to endow their grace as well as their wrath upon humble beings like us. Now I knew through my experiences

at the royal palace that city people are cheats and swindlers but alas, so few of us learn lessons from the wisdom gained through past experiences. One day I was sitting in a garden by the river bank, lost in thoughts about what would become of my future when a well dressed young city man approached me. He listened to my plight and then it seemed to me that he had sympathy in his heart. He was exceedingly sweet and we kept talking for a very long time. But I did not suspect at all that he was not speaking from his heart. He said- "If you do not mind, you can stay with me till you find some other place." Then he gave me a place to live at a house built inside a garden outside the city. I would sing and play the Veena for him to pay him back. He pretended that he was in love with me. I thought, it is better to settle down with someone than to roam about haplessly in this big cruel world. But once he got access to my affection and my shame he presumed that I had become his slave forever, dependant upon him for food, clothes, roof over my head. He changed completely and began to treat me like a bought slave. Bitter words, abuses and finally beatings— his behaviour kept getting worse, if I tried to resist he would beat me with a bamboo stick. My life became hell. One of his friends would show sympathy for me. Though I was scarred and suspicious, what choices do helpless women like us have? I was desperate to run away from the clutches of that butcher. His friend brought me here. Before long, he too began to treat me in the same manner. At last I met a prostitute. She told me-'This is the only way out for a woman without shelter. I cannot tell what would be our fate in the hell, but I can say as much that for a helpless creature like me this is the only way to gain some respite in this living hell. Since then I am Madhumati, the prostitute of Dantapuri city."

Probably she blamed herself for what she had gone through. But I understood the world that we lived in too well by now to agree with her. Against the harsh contradictions of our society, there isn't much that a lone women can do. What other choice did Madhumati have except probably committing suicide? I fully agree with Buddha's teaching that committing suicide is utter foolishness. How could I despise her after knowing what she had gone through; the reasons behind decisions that were forced upon her by our cruel society? I too used to think like the rest of the people that prostitutes are fallen creatures. Listening to her story it had become clear to me now that it is circumstances beyond a woman's control which force them to become prostitutes. I sought her permission to leave and said- "Dear lady! I do not look upon you as worthy of contempt. I am a young art lover and I have compassion for fellow human beings. I empathize with all the sufferings that you had to go through. I do not

intend to be at Dantapur for too long, but so long as I am here I would not hesitate from visiting you on and off."

Madhumati came up to the doorstep and saw me off with folded hands. I told all that had happened to Simha and Vasanti and said- "Our women are reduced to such destitution. Could such a thing have happened in the Shabars' village?"

For as long as I stayed at Dantapur, I kept visiting Madhumati. She would sing and play the Veena for me and I would do the same for her.

At Kanchi

When it was time for me to leave Dantapur Madhumati was very upset. She was not born to be a prostitute. Circumstances forced her to trade her body for a living. It surprised me that she was not appreciated more for her skills in music. A possible reason could be that her art was too sophisticated for the riff raff that visited her.

Though our first sea voyage was a disaster, Vasanti was still unafraid of travelling on a ship and we so reached Kalinga's capital Pishtapur through the sea route.

It is always difficult for a new comer to adapt to the ways of a new city. We were particularly apprehensive because we did not speak the local language. But when we reached Pishtapur, we realized that Magadhi held its sway everywhere. Among the rich and educated there was scarcely anyone who did not speak old Magadhi. And it was also the first language of the royal clan. The city had numerous inns for travellers like us. There are markets dedicated to specific merchandise and crafts. These markets are always full of exotic merchandise from all over the world. The sea is ferocious but it brings the world together; there is no faster medium for goods and men to travel upon. Sumatra, Greece, Sinhala and China all are brought closer to each other by it. Tamralipti and Shurpaka might be on the opposite sides of the subcontinent but that does not stop merchandise from flowing into this port through the sea. Thousands of foreigner-merchants and sailors are present in this city at all times and if one were to take a walk through its markets, one could hear dozens of different languages being spoken. Though Kalinga is politically independent, in all other fields it is under the influence of Magadha. Magadhan attire and language command respect here. Magadhan craftsmen and sculptors are much in demand. Men and women try to imitate Magadhan fashion. To trade with foreigners Magadhan weighing scales-Khari, Drona, Aadhuk,

Prastha and Kudav are used. In literature and arts Magadhan dominance is complete. Kalinga received a crushing defeat at the hands of Magadhans once; Kalingans had fought bravely but Ashoka had unleashed such savagery that they were forced to submit. This victory, however, changed Ashoka for lifetime, his heart melted as he witnessed the inhumanity of his brutal war. So he accepted Buddhism and took the vow of pacifism for the rest of his life. Kalinga was henceforth treated with gentleness and affection. Buddhism is still very popular in Magadha, probably this too is a result of Ashoka's influence. Since that defeat, Kalingans have felt pride in imitating the Magadhans in every aspects of life.

I had several acquaintances at Pishthapur, but I did not want to be recognized here a kin of the royal family of Patliputra. In about two-three days Simha managed to trace one of his clansmen living here. Simha Verma belonged to the Pallava dynasty of Kanchi, very distantly related to the present ruler of Kanchi also a Pallava -'Pallava Narendra Parambhattaraka Simha Verma'. Pallavas' is a very ancient dynasty and, therefore, the number of collateral houses and parallel clans among them is huge. It is impossible for the emperor at Kanchi to take good care of all his extended clansmen but still they are rarely let to be reduced to utter penury. It is easy for them to secure offices in the royal administration,particularly high offices in the army. Though historically it has been observed that no dynasty can hold the throne for more than a century or two but their descendants are scarcely ever reduced to destitution even though they might lose the royal power. Despite the bitterest of wars, the victor family is usually reluctant to reduce the erstwhile ruling clan to the status of paupers. In most cases their honour is left unmolested and they are given some sort of lordship or office under the paramountcy of the new ruling family. Why so? No clemency is shown if ordinary village folks or peasants dare challenge the authority of the king. Entire villages are wiped out, whole populations annihilated, even the children and old are not spared and those who manage to flee are forced to live like vagabonds. But kings do not treat kings like that. They know very well that it is the duty of every king to protect the honour and well being of other kings irrespective of whether they are enemies or friends. In future similar misfortune might strike one's own family just as it has struck a defeated adversary now. Apart from this most of the royal families are related to each other through marriage alliances. One of the daughters of the emperor of Pishtapur, king Mahendra is present in the royal harem of Patliputra, Kanchi's emperor too has sent a daughter to Samudra Gupta's harem. Just as king's understand the importance of collecting treasures from their lords, they are also aware of the usefulness of women in their families- a treasure that

may be utilized to earn political privileges and alliances. For all practical purposes, kings and nobles constitute a closed caste. They fight amongst each other, but they are also keenly aware of the boundaries beyond which they ought not stretch their internal bickerings. Against outsiders- common foes, lords and kings act as one tribe, a unified caste.

One of Simha Verma's distant relatives held a high post at the court of Pishtapur. His sole qualification for this distinguished position was the fact that the emperor was enamoured by the charms of his pretty sister.

One day Simha and Vasanti visited the palace of Ashva-Baladhikrita (captain of the cavalry). I had to go along as well. Simha introduced me as a music teacher. The Ashavapati was a connoisseur of music-literature and all other arts; every courtier must pretend to be one. I had begun to realize gradually in terms of gaining an employment, all my knowledge, gained so painstakingly from Acharya Vasubandhu was useless in comparison to my skills with music and sculpture. These were skills that could be translated into a sort of international currency. I had now begun to consider myself fortunate for having a taste for these arts during my stay at Patliputra. Simha Verma had painted a beautiful picture of a sinking ship. He presented it at the court, following which he was commissioned to paint several more for the emperor. Now Simha could afford to extend his stay at Pishtapur slightly longer. I did not reveal my skills as a sculptor, preferring to be introduced as a music teacher instead. Among the aristocracy and rich mercantile community music teachers are much sought after. All young women are expected to learn dancing-singing and musical instruments. It is a saying here that the beauty of a woman who does not cultivate her taste for arts is akin to that of a flower without aroma. Even if she manages to win a husband through her beauty and youth, she would not be valued by him as much as his other wives who can charm through their skills in arts. This is what the rich call love for arts. Brides who have learnt arts are much sought after because they bring prestige to the families into which they are wedded. I do not look down upon any kind of useful art but it is rather difficult for me to make sense of this pretense for the love of arts. 'My wives, sisters and daughters sing like cuckoos, they are skilled at playing the musical instruments, their dancing is unparalleled.' So far so good, these arts make our lives beautiful. But what I despise is that these arts are acquired primarily for the purpose of increasing a woman's worth in the marriage market. Though I must admit that I reaped a lot of benefits out of my childhood love for music. Bala Verma had a fourteen years old daughter. She was already being given lessons in music but when he heard about me, I was requested to be her music master. As a start I became the music teacher for just his

household. The girl had a good voice and she was naturally talented. Within a very short duration her mother and father realized that the music teacher from Magadha, though very young, is very talented. In less than six months, through my young disciple, my fame began to spread in the city. Requests began to pour in from high noblemen and state officials. In the beginning I tried going wherever I was invited but soon due to the sheer number of requests it became impossible for me to oblige every request. I did not want to offend anyone either, so after a month or two, on the advice of Simha and Vasanti I started a music school to be able to teach a number of pupils together. Soon their number rose to the extent that I was forced to hire some more music masters to teach at my school. While selecting music masters for my school I was reminded of Madhumati. She would have been so suitable for this job! But I knew fully well that despite her talents I could not have brought her to this school. My music school prospered a lot. A number of girls were from the royal family too. Soon my fame reached the emperor. Though I was most unwilling, I was afterall a mere music teacher, how could I have refused a request from the emperor himself? A number of times I had to perform at his court with my students. I did not mind as much but now the king requested to shift the music school within the premises of the royal palace under the pretence of giving me a suitable location to run my school from. What choice did I have? Though I was much sought after within the elite circles of the city, my status was still that of a servant. Now attendants from the royal palace began to frequent my school and before long I got to know that the emperor is requesting some of my students to perform for him in private! I began to dread my own prestige now. But when I mentioned this predicament to Bala Verma he dismissed it as a minor issue. I was astonished to see that most parents were actually happy that their daughter were close to the emperor now and they expressed all the more gratitude for my talents. I had observed spontaneous love among Shabars, it was unblemished from greed for wealth and power, but what I saw here I could not but consider it any better than rape. A vice that bred victims like Madhumati. This was not acceptable to me, much despaired I sought Simha's advice. On his suggestion the three of us left the city on the pretext that we are going on vacation and fled the city!

We boarded a ship to Uragpur. After a few days voyage it anchored at a pilgrimage city inside the boundaries of the Pallava empire. From there we took the land route. Now we did not have a language impediment because Simha knew the local Dravida language. In the cities one could occasionally came across people who spoke the old Magadhi language but they were very few in number. We got to know that there is a very famous Shiva temple at Gudimallam. Simha had grown up hearing about its great

religious significance but had never visited it. I wanted to visit it due to my interest in old sculpture which I was certain would be present at an old temple like this one. We reached the city. This is considered one of the most eminent centres of pilgrimage in the Dravida country. Though it wasn't the festival season yet, the city was still very crowded with devotees. We entered the temple with flowers and garlands for the deity. Men and women were offering worship with a great deal of devotion, some had settled down crosslegged and were staring at the idol with rapt attention. But what was the idol like? It was a piece of rock about three feet high! It would seem that some able artist had deliberately abused his talents to carve out this monstrosity out of rock; he had carved out a phallus with precision. By the side of this phallus he had carved another male figure whose phallus was conspicuously exposed. Without doubt there was considerable artistry here but it was not meant to convey any sort of aesthetics; rather its purpose was to evoke a macabre feeling. It was difficult for us to stay there any longer. Vasanti looked at the figure once and then bent her eyes. Upon reaching the inn where we were staying I said-

"I pity human intellect."

"Jai! I had heard only good things about this shrine since I was small. My entire family is Shavite and they consider it a great fortune to visit this place."

"Are you feeling fortunate as well? Now that you have visited this shrine?"

"Jai ! Really! It does not make any sense to me; why would they represent their deity like this?"

"It is beyond the means of an ordinary man to build such a temple and idol. Millions of dinars must have gone into building these. That idol is in fact a mirror of the decadent lifestyles of the rich. God! How do parents stand before that phallus with their grown children? And what sort of feelings does it evoke in their minds?"

"Jai! You always speak ill of religion and I often felt that your views are one sided but the sight of this idol was an eye opener for me.Now I feel convinced that the purpose of religion is not to edify our spirits but to plunge it into a deep morass. It is hardly surprising that merchants-lords-brahmins who promote such idols are given to debauchery worse than animals. And I wonder who that shameless sculptor might be?"

"Most probably that artist was merely following orders. He might have received a considerable sum in return. It is also possible that he would have been punished if he had refused to oblige. And brother Simha! Is it not incredible that the very people who come to worship this idol

with their families talk about chastity and control over senses? In my opinion this is height of shamelessness."

"Shamelessness! I think this is a stigma on our art."

"I have seen nude statues of Trithankaras, I do not like them much either but you do not see such explicit portrayal of raunchiness in them."

Vasanti was keeping quiet till now. But when Tirthankars were mentioned she was forced to speak- "Jai dear! It is true to an extent that women tend to be more given to blind faith. I too used to go on a regular basis to offer worship to the naked idols of Tirthankaras. Though in most cases the sculptors try to portray faces bearing child like simplicity, devoid of licentiousness, however, among some idols. I did notice that they had taken some liberties. But even that was nothing in comparison to what we saw today. In my opinion that was the beginning point and this is the culmination."

From the Shiva temple (Gudimallam) we travelled to Kanchi. Simha's parents were extremely pleased to see their son return after so long and the arrival of a daughter-in-law redoubled their pleasure. Vasanti touched Simha's mother's feet and received her blessings. Upon being introduced by Simha, his parents accepted me as one of their own- I was again introduced as a scholar and an artist.

Simha and Vasanti had reached their destination but my journey was still incomplete. Kanchi is a very old capital. Successive generations of kings have gone on adding new palaces and temples to the city. Kanchi serves as the capital of the strongest kingdom in south-the Pallava empire. All the rest kings of south have paid obeisance to the Pallava emperor for generations. Though the prestige of Pallava emperors suffered a setback after emperor Vishnu Gopa's drubbing at the hands of Samudra Gupta, they still command a great deal of awe over the entire stretch between Kalinga and the sea coast in the extreme south. Kanchi may be considered the Patliputra of south;it matches the latter not just in wealth and splendour but also in learning and arts. Though Magadhi speakers are rarely seen in the Dravida country; Kanchi seems like an extension of Patliputra insofar as the use of Magadhi is concerned. But their Magadhi is not the same as Patliputra's; they speak a form of Magadhi that was spoken at Patliputra two-four centuries back. Most of the Dravidians are dark skinned but Pallavas are as fair as Gandharas and Shakas. Simha Verma used to say that his ancestors were Shakas. They arrived at the subcontinent from some foreign land and took service at the court of the Shaka Kshatrapa of Avanti, then later some of them entered the service of Satavahana

emperors. When the Satavahana empire began to disintegrate the Pallava commander at Kanchi declared independence.

Kanchi was like home to me now, but I did not consider settling down here as my journey was still incomplete. I had not left Yaudheya land, departed from Patliputra to settle down quietly at Kanchi. I still wanted to go to Sinhala and learn the rules of Vinaya (Bhikshus' code of conduct) there. But it would have been difficult to convince Simha and Vasanti had I insisted upon departing immediately. I dropped the idea of being a music teacher here lest the same might happen as at Pishtapur. Though I often performed for a select circle of close friends. I thought of utilizing my skills as a sculptor here; later I got know of a Charvaka philosopher and began to visit him. Charvakas do not believe in soul, god, religion and rebirth. I had read about some of their principles earlier but this was the first time that I had the opportunity to meet a Charvaka scholar in person. He had several Charvaka texts including the famous Brihaspati Sutra. Till then I had only read about Charvaka philosophy through secondary references but now for the first time I could read about it through its own texts. Though I could never agree with this philosophy. They believed- "We have got but one life to live, so enjoy as much as you can, incur debts and make merry, no harm can come your way after you are dead."

Though this Charvaka scholar claimed that this was the key mantra of Charvaka philosophy, I had my doubts. I was not his student so I could visit him and debate as a friend would and I did not hesitate from contradicting his arguments if I disagreed. He had inherited a lot of wealth so earning a livelihood was not one of his concerns. Alcohol and women were his primary preoccupations. He would say to me- "Friend Jai! You have the gift of youth, do not waste it. Once you are past the spring of life, it would never come back."

"I do not think this is how we ought to interpret Charvaka philosophy my friend! Charvaka refused to accept the existence of God because he wanted humans to be the creators of their own destiny; to overcome the illusion of being puppets in the hands of the Providence. Charvaka rejected the brahminical notion that humans possess eternal and unchanging souls autonomous from our worldly existence; this belief allowed him to argue that humans' fates are not governed by some immutable spirit deep within and, therefore, they are capable of changing on their own initiatives their mental constitutions and spirits throughout every moment of their existence. Charvaka denied the existence of the other world and rebirth to exhort us to build here, in this very world, things that we seek in the afterlife; other world or heaven is a figment of our imagination, if we put in an effort we can make this very world heaven."

"I do not agree with that. In your stubborn bid to make a heaven out of this world, you will end up wasting your entire life. It is way better to enjoy the pleasures that already exist while one has the chance."

"I never said that we need to deny ourselves the pleasures that already exist. But we must never forget that these pleasures are a creation of the joint efforts of all of us and, therefore, it would be unjust and selfish to reserve them for just one's own self. And the pleasures that already exist would increase manifolds if all of us put in a joint effort. I do not think anything can justify reaping of crops planted and nurtured by someone else. None of us can be really happy if there is misery all around us. Why not take your own example, if most of your family was starving to death, would you be able to indulge yourself in this manner. Say your son is in a lot of pain and misery; would you still be able to make merry like you do now?"

"Some things are natural my friend. Probably Charvaka would say in response that we should care about just ourselves, here and now, and there is no need to waste time worrying about others. But I am not so strong yet to adhere to that ideal consistently."

"Humans are not capable of that sort of cruelty; their hearts are gentle, their sentiments are gentle. In my opinion there is no human whose heart does not cry out in rage upon seeing the weak being oppressed by the strong."

"But I have not come across this sort of interpretation in any of the Charvaka treatises?"

"Charvaka-philosophy abhors book worship. It does not believe in confusing our common sense by citing sages and philosophers. Secondly, the type of Charvaka-philosophy that you have come across through your treatises belongs to the lords and merchants."

"Lords' and merchants' philosophy! How many Charvaka merchants and lords have you seen in your lifetime?"

"I meant, the philosophy that you are propagating in the name of Charvaka, belongs to the powerful and the affluent. Without exception they abide by its principles. "Do not care about anything but one's own narrow self interest and do not hesitate from poisoning or putting to the sword your own parents and brothers if they begin to hinder your blind ambition to accumulate power and wealth. This is the crux of their life philosophy."

"No! You are much mistaken my friend; lords and merchants invariably make fun of my views."

"And yet they are the most diligent adherents of the life philosophy that you propagate. They hesitate from saying this in so many words because they thrive on theft and thieves are always reluctant in stepping into the bright light of a full moon night."

"That is a very harsh judgement on my views my friend!"

"But am I wrong? Who is responsible for turning this world into a living hell? Had they been firm believers in the afterworld, they would have desisted from all sorts of indulgences and survived on bare essentials. Then the masses would not have to live in such misery and destitution, nor would there have been so much bloodshed in the world. Belief in afterlife is merely a pretence for them, they need people to believe that they have a god ordained right to steal from the people for the good deeds they did in their past lives."

"This could be a judgement about my life as well!"

"You are hardly any different from them. You share their life-philosophy. The first Charvaka philosopher must have rejected the ideas of god and afterlife because it was unbearable for him to see gullible masses cheated of their fruits of labour with the lure of a happy afterlife. He was targeting these swindlers, his objective was to make this world a better place and he desired to spread feelings of love and brotherhood among the masses."

"Which Charvaka beliefs are you talking about? I never heard such things before."

"The Charvaka sect I know of rejects blind faith, swears by reason and disdains to accept anything without testing it first through the crucible of its own lived experiences." You swear by your books but refuse to apply your own reason; first you were enslaved to one set of books, now you worship another set. There is no difference between you and them; you desire a lifetime of hedonism and so does the Pallava emperor. You base this self indulgence upon exploitation and cruelty without caring about the god or the afterlife; Pallava emperor does the same. So what makes you any different from him? Barring your self celebration that you are man of reason because you reject certain ideas."

"So my dear friend! You are trying to convince me that us Charvakas have done nothing to advance the authority of reason."

"It is not a question of whether you have done something or not; the more pertinent question here is whether you have done the right thing or not."

"We have done the right thing Jai! We have married hedonism with rationalism to give this world a philosophy that rejects all sorts of blind faiths and illumines the minds of the masses."

"Do you know about the Shiva temple at Gudimallam?"

"Of course, I have been there several times."

"To worship the deity; offer your prayers?"

"Of course not! I went there with my friends to show them that hedonism is the essence of religion; lord of lords Mahadeva is himself a personification of this basic impulse."

"So you mean to say that your friends did not lead hedonistic lives before this visit?"

"They did, but they were not ready to accept that hedonism was the basic truth of life."

"So now they proclaim loudly and defend confidently what they did earlier anyway. All that this place of pilgrimage teaches us is that ideas of supreme being and afterlife act merely as subterfuges to hide the basic purpose of religion- to secure a lifetime of revelry for the powerful and affluent. Upon the rest of us it forces lives worse than animals; no hedonism for the masses. We do not reject pursuit of pleasures, provided that they are not based upon someone else's misery or obtained through clouding others' ability to reason. Our pursuit of happiness rejects theft of others' hard earned labour; we want the sort of hedonism in which all may participate; which might be in the interest of generations yet to come."

"I admire your vision but tell me Jai, if I cannot feed the entire city would you suggest that I should throw away my own food as well?"

"If the entire city is hungry then I would not throw away my food, I would place it in front of the most needy among them; this is what humanity dictates. And why is the entire city hungry? What can be done to save them? What kind of steps can be taken to alleviate this situation? Why not use your ability to reason to think about these instead?"

"But how many would be willing to tread the path you propose?"

"And even if you get many who are willing to tread this path, would the 'powers that be' allow you to move forward in this direction?"

"But how many of them are there? Very few in number."

"They might be few but their strength is immense; they have got the state power in their hands"

"And I have got this jar of red wine in my hand, so let me enjoy while I can."

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Like Pishtapur, Kanchi too was a center for international trade. I did not need to work for a livelihood. Simha Verma's parents were quite affluent; my staying in the house was not a burden to them at all. But I had started practising sculpture, albeit purely for recreation. I was busy carving a depiction of the sale of slaves. It was not an imaginary portrayal. Apart from being the grandest city in Dakshinapatha, Kanchi also holds the ignominy of being the biggest slave mart in this region. Paid servants are apparently not good enough for the rich, so they buy humans who may be treated like beasts of burden. Slave merchants from all parts of the world are seen in this mart. Some look like they might be Greeks whereas some are from China. Some have long beards while some shave off their heads and beards clean. These slaves are herded to the mart from the port like sheep, whipped and caned on the way. Slave owners' shops are among the biggest in the cities. Though they cannot display their 'wares' in the same manner as other shopkeepers, once one enters one of these shops, haggling, dealing etc are done in the same manner as any other normal business. Potential buyers are led to a big courtyard where the slaves are displayed. They try to convince the customers that their merchandize is in perfect serviceable condition. If a slave woman is in her forties, they try to pass her off as being in twenties; if a woman is past the age to produce children, they tell the customers that she is capable of conceiving every year. If the slave is very lean and thin, they say that he is still not past the age to grow and that he is looking emaciated due to the stress of a long journey. Customers and dealers bargain over these living humans as though they are buying something in the fish mart. If the dealer quotes a price of ten dinars to begin with, it is not unlikely that he will eventually settle for a price of five dinars. Slaves belong to all nationalities and races but I noticed that the largest number of them belonged to a race with thick lips, curly hair and dark skins. I was relatively better informed about the plight of local slaves—people become slaves upon selling themselves or being sold by their parents, children of slaves remain slaves; at times the emperor orders that a person be sold off as a slave for some crime he might have committed against the crown. I had relatively less knowledge about how people from foreign lands ended up becoming slaves. My curiosity was whetted further upon hearing rumours that some slave merchants make hunting—raiding expeditions to trap slaves, as though they are some sort of wild animals. It was not easy to communicate with slaves themselves as most of them spoke foreign languages. There were separate shops for female slaves from good families. If a slave girl was pretty, she sold very fast; particularly slave girls of Greek origin were in high demand, if I saw a girl in the market today, the next day she would not be there. And if she was an outstanding beauty, her place lay in the royal palace. In these

shops, slave girls did not have to sit half naked, on the floor. Every care was taken to make them look their prettiest best. I felt that in the practice of slavery humanity had reached its nadir but I frequently had occasion to converse with holy men, who upon being asked of their opinion about slavery assumed a solemn demeanour and declared grandly that these wretched creatures were merely paying the price for their sins in their previous births. But could this Karma theory explain why some slaves were treated worse than animals whereas pretty slave girls were given all comforts? As if merchants' forcing a pretty slave girl to preen herself to fetch a higher price was also determined by the Providence keeping in mind her bad karma in the previous births.

One day I came across a craftsman-slave. As a child he had been brought up in the household of an Indian merchant settled at Alexandria. He told me- "Our village is located by the sea. One day our village was raided by a band of robbers. We tried to fight them but the robbers outnumbered us. A great number of our people were killed, some fled and those of us who were left behind were held captive by the robbers and taken to their ship. Sometime later they sold us to slave traders. Most of my friends got sold at the ports on the way. Four were sold at Sinhala and I am to be sold here.

How could he ever prove in this foreign land that he was not born a slave? In the evenings slaves were shut in cellars like animals. If the weather was very hot, they would be left in the courtyard of the shop for the night; many of them tied together with one chain. One day I saw three male and one female slaves tied up in this manner and decided to carve them in stone. I requested the slave merchant who owned them to leave them like this in the courtyard for three days; he agreed readily, seeing no reason to turn down a polite request from a suave looking gentleman. I set about carving them with a lot of concentration. By the side of the tied up slaves I depicted a greedy looking merchant too and Simha allowed me to portray him as a buyer. When the carving was ready I showed it to my Charvaka friend and said- "This is a depiction of the precious gifts we have been granted by our belief in the afterlife and it confirms your hedonism as well." About the thick lipped black slaves I heard that slave merchants maintain regular armies to capture them. There was no way to tell to what extent this was true but I was immediately reminded of the Shabars' village. It is probable that their small villages deep inside the forests are ravaged by these marauders in the same manner.

This was the lowest ebb of what remained of humanity. Slavery exists in the royal harem, as well as common households.I was slightly relieved about the fact that I had not heard of this sort of slave hunting in any of the

countries I had visited myself. Among the rich at Kanchi, there was no dearth of god fearing devout men. When they heard of my Charvaka-atheistic beliefs, attempts would be made to somehow convince me of the existence of the god through arguments and logic.

"Everything has a cause. Clay pots do not appear out of nothing, the potter makes them. Likewise there must be a maker of this world too."

I would say- "Then he must be the maker of these slaves as well; if at all a god exists, he must be a very cruel and sadistic person. We may expect no good from him."

Then they would begin to talk about afterlife and bad karma in the previous births. I would say- "I wonder why do you punish thieves then. He is brave and he works hard to get hold of the fruits of his previous births but you chop his hands, behead him, get him thrown off from cliffs!"

Dakshinapatha is very different from north in many ways, but insofar as the nature of lords and masters is concerned there is no difference between the two. Brahmins—Shramanas are respected here as well; brahmins more so because they are very few in number here. The latter exercise more influence upon the kings and lords than Shramanas; a probable reason is that brahmins hold the right to decide the caste status of individuals and communities. Among Sharamanas-Bhikshus-persons from all castes are found and so even the locals can join their ranks. Though Bhikshus do not discriminate amongst themselves on the basis of caste, the lay followers are often seen enquiring about the caste of particular Bhikshus. Pallavas have constructed numerous viharas and donated a great number of villages to the Bhikshus and hold scholarly Bhikshus in reverence. But the emperor seems to understand that doing charity to brahmins is relatively more beneficial for him.

I spent almost one year at Kanchi. There wasn't much to do. I would spend the day meeting scholars and artists; though remaining cautious all the while that my real identity should not be revealed to anyone. In the evenings we would hold convivial parties at home—a drink or two with Vasanti, Simha and other friends, playing of the veena, singing or bantering with Simha and Vasanti. The rest of the time would go in meeting talented men from various walks or in contemplating about the decadence of urban life in general. During this entire period my relations with my Charvaka friend remained cordial, despite our obvious differences of opinion. I would often go to the Mahavihara at Kanchi and meet the Bhikshus there. Many a time I would start a discussion with them. By now I had reached a stage when I could readily concede the greatness of Buddha, the man, but I had serious reservations about Buddhism, the religion. Despite these debates

and differences all this while they treated me very well. I suspect my being Acharya Vasubandhu's disciple might have been the reason. His fame as a scholar-philosopher had crossed the ocean by now. During the last few months of my stay here, I developed acquaintance with a very bright young Bhikshu. He was eager to learn. I gave him lessons in Acharya Vasubandhu's 'Vaad Vidhan' and a few other treatises. I told him that in my opinion Acharya was among the greatest philosophers of the modern times. As he was very eager to learn more I told him that Acharya had left for Gandhara. So one day he packed his things and left to be his disciple. Later I heard that this young man-Dinnaga-studied with Acharya to become a famous thinker himself and was proving to be a bane for brahmins and other bookish pseudo religious scholars.

At last I made up my mind to leave Kanchi. Simha, Vasanti and I had been together for last three years. Through death and life, pleasure and pain we had stayed together. It is never easy to part ways with such friends. Vasanti said- "Jai, I had begun to believe that the three of us would remain together for the rest of our lives! Perhaps it would have been better if we had never left the Shabar village."

"Vasanti! You don't want me remind you of your attire at that village."

"You know Jai, the first time you asked me to accept their attire it was both a bitter and sweet experience for me."

"It was sweet too?!"

Simha laughed at this and said- "Perhaps coming from you it was sweet."

"Yes Jai! Now when I think back, I realize how sweet that phase of our lives was. Being here we have all the comforts of the city life but its flip side is our remorseless cruelty. That image of slaves that you inscribed touched the deepest core of our hearts. It is easy to call Shabars ignorant-helpless barbarians, but can one imagine slavery at their village? I still remember Jai, how uncomplicated and carefree Shyama was. I have had many friends but I think it's impossible that I could ever have another one like her."

"Impossible! All we need to do is to get on a ship and hope that it runs into a storm. What say Jai?"

"We part ways never to meet again. Human life demands that we keep moving ahead, if this wasnt been so we would become trees; growing together and braving rain and storm together."

It was very difficult to part ways with Simha and Vasanti.

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At Sinhala

I was in two minds regarding the route to Sinhala- I could travel on foot to the tip of the subcontinent. At that point the island is very close to the subcontinent, separated by a very narrow channel of water about forty miles wide. If I decided to take this route I could visit Pandya capital Mathura (Madura) too on the way. But this route is said to be very dangerous. Less so due to wild beasts than the cutthroat robber bands which lurk about on the highway. I travelled through land route upto Kaveri Pattan (port) and from there embarked for Sinhala. Sea voyages can be extremely dull and so it is quite natural for fellow travellers to become friends with each other. Not knowing a person is never an impediment in becoming friends with him, humans spontaneously seek comfort in each other, bonding through the mute language of humanity when they are unable to understand each others' spoken words. I was rather apprehensive about the language problem that I might face ahead; it was already proving difficult to communicate with people in the Pandya kingdom. And to add to my apprehension, I had heard numerous stories about Sinhala- 'It is inhabited by ogresses who work dark magic upon lost travellers and turn them into animals condemned to serve them for eternity.' But now these were mere stories to me, meant to entertain small children. With increasing age, knowledge and through the experience I had gathered during my travels I had little faith left in these fantasies that people narrated about distant lands. As I heard Sinhalese being spoken by fellow travellers, I realized to my relief that I could comprehend their language; even though the language spoken by the people of Pallava and Pandya kingdoms was beyond my comprehension- my one year long stay at Kanchi had apparently not helped much. I had spent most of my time with brahmins and the ruling aristocracy who spoke old Magadhi but the language of the masses was Dravidian. Apart from people from Sinhala and the subcontinent, among my fellow travellers there were people from a wide range of nationalities of whom I had never heard before. I became friends with a young brahmin from Yavadvipa and another young man from Sinhala. The man from Sinhala was named Rohan and the brahmin from Yavadvipa was called Arjun. Earlier I had heard lots of stories about Sinhala at Kanchi too, but now that we were so close to Sinhala such stories were not to be heard. Hearsay seldom carries any element of truth; as you travel further from a nation, a forty mile journey becomes five hundred miles journey, black and brown people transform into scary demons and routes become infested with ghosts and evil spirits. When I had set out, I did not expect to come out unscathed from the face of such

otherworldly perils but reality turned out to be much more banal. It was fun to discuss these stories with Rohan and Arjun. I asked Rohan- "How far is Barhvanal from where you live? (Barhvanal is a giant inferno that supposedly emanated from the womb of the ocean.)"

Rohan said- "It is not visible from the northern part of Sinhala. The southern part of our island is called Rohan. Barhvanal is visible from the southern coast of Rohan. But you need to climb a tree or a hill to be able to see it. It is also known that if some God catches you looking at Barhvanal then you are as good as dead."

"We have stories about Barhvanal at Yavadwipa too. It is said that it is located further south of our island. It is visible only at night but if you so much as cast a glance at it, it sucks you in, into its flames. Though I live on the southern coast of my island, I have not been sucked in yet."

I asked him- "What are the people of Yavadvipa like?"

"What do you mean, 'what are they like'? They are like me."

"Aren't people there different from us?"

"They are very different. In Yavadvipa, except among Indians, there is no caste system."

"So then there are no brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras there?"

"As I said, No! Castes exists only among people who have emigrated from India, but they are very few in number."

"Friend Arjun! Please excuse me, but I can see that your appearance is no different from other inhabitants of Yavadvipa I met earlier, the same lack of facial hair, small eyes and high cheekbones."

"Brahmins at Yavadvipa have become somewhat lax in observing strict marriage rules. My great grandfather had emigrated from Kanchi. As I grew up, I felt very eager to see my ancestral land and meet our old family once. But once I reached here, I realized that they do not consider me a part of their family anymore and treat me like a mlechchhs. The main reason for this is my facial appearance which looks more Chinese than Indian."

Rohan- "But why did this happen? We Sinhalese had arrived here from north India more than a thousand years ago, but we still speak the same language; our friend Jai here would tell you that our language is still very close to the one spoken in Magadha. Our facial features have not altered either."

Arjun- "Our case is very different Rohan! Yavadvipa is a very big country. Most of the people there look the same as I do. It is possible that

your ancestors arrived at Sinhala in very huge numbers, or there might be some other reason due to which your facial features have not changed. But the brahmins, scions of ruling dynasties and merchants who settled down at Yavadvipa were very few in numbers; like a drop in the ocean of original inhabitants of Yavadvipa. And many, like my great grandfather did not go with their own women, so they had to inter-marry with the locals. My great grandfather Bhanudutta Sharma was a brave young man and a good scholar. The king of Yavadvipa, Mahendra Verma wanted to organize a grand sacrifice, so my great grandfather was invited to preside over it. He was more learned than all the rest-there were very few brahmin families at Yavadvipa then. When the grand sacrifice was conducted successfully, not only did he get liberal gifts but the king also bestowed upon him the privilege of marrying his own daughter, the princess."

Jai- "Do the people of Yavadvipa have the same kind of names as us?"

Arjun- "Among brahmins and kshatriyas most have the same sort of names as Indians but not all of them are first generation immigrants- many have descended from families that have lived there for generations now. The kings there like to trace their lineage to one of the royal families in India; but when I had had occasion to see people from the Pallava royal family at Kanchi, I realized that they in fact look very different. Our family has been marrying royal princesses for three generations. I think it's these marriages that caused us to lose our Kanchi appearance."

Jai- "So this means that Indian blood got mingled into the vast ocean of Yavadvipa blood. But the brahmin royal families want to add some droplets to it and claim the entire ocean as their own."

Rohan- "This does not apply to the brahmins of Sinhala. Many of them go as far as Ujjayini and Patliputra for education and marry fine women from good families. And they are still treated with respect by the families of their ancestors."

Jai- "Arjun! Can you distinguish any differences between our faces?"

Arjun- "Though every individual has his own distinct look, insofar as broad features are concerned, the two of you seem to belong to the same caste; only you are relatively fairer in complexion."

Jai- "And the same holds true of brahmins here as well. Moreover brahmins from Sinhala speak a very similar language. Dear friend Arjun! Had brahmins from Sinhala looked as different from Magadhans as you do, I highly doubt it that Magadhans would have let them marry their daughters either."

Arjun- "Before visiting Kanchi, I used to think that I am above the rest of the people of Yavadvipa as I had a pure brahman blood. I learnt all the

Vedas by heart, learnt as many brahminical texts as I could lay hold of. I am highly respected there for my high birth and learning. King Purna Verma's daughter is still awaiting my return at Taruma (a city) for us to get married. But I wanted to meet my ancestral clan at Kanchi once, in fact secretly I was also hoping to marry a suitable girl from my own caste at Kanchi."

Jai- "So where is your bride then?"

Arjun- "Bride! Brahmins would not even let me so much as enter their houses. I am happy that even before entering Kanchi I realized that merely speaking Sanskrit fluently, wearing fine linen and a thick sacred thread is not enough to secure the respect of brahmins; one look at my face and they would begin to frown. Wherever I went, brahmins humiliated me and called me mlechchs. By the time I reached Kanchi, I was fully aware that the brahmins would never accept me as one of their own. I managed to trace the whereabouts of Bhanudutta Sharma's clan and extant family members. I met the descendants of his brothers."

Rohan- "So how did they welcome you?"

Arjun- "Welcome! I did not even bother to introduce myself. All I told them is that Bhanudutta of your clan attained a lot of renown at Yavadvipa and that his descendents still live there."

Jai- "You did the right thing Arjuna. Telling them that you are a descendent of Bhanudutta would not have helped. You might command reverence at Yavadvipa but to the brahmins here you are just fallen people."

Arjun- "After this experience I have lost all sense of pride in my high blood. From now on I will consider myself no different from ordinary people of Yava. In fact I have begun to hate brahmins who migrate to Yava and try to plant the seeds of high and low birth among people there. What they do not realize is that once you emigrate, our people do not differentiate between high born and low born foreigners."

Jai- "So you got a taste of your own people's- brahmins' bitter medicine?"

Rohan- "They have been so successful in dividing up the humankind into so many categories high and low."

Arjun- "What I have understood now is that by insisting on purity of blood and distinguishing between high and low castes, we have brought dishonour and contempt upon ourselves. I can tell other brahmins at Yava about what I have realized now but they do not have first hand experience of humiliation at Kanchi. And more importantly they have a vested interest

in clinging on to the power and wealth which come along with profession of their high birth and purity of blood."

Jai- "In my opinion you should adopt Buddha's religion, it does not distinguish on the basis of blood; neither does it insist on spreading the rigid caste structure among the people of other countries."

Arjun- "But aren't the Buddhists of India as much divided amongst themselves on caste lines?"

Jai- "Through its thousands of years of existence, the caste system here has become so firmly entrenched that Buddhists could not break it despite trying very hard."

"I regret it that after waging a bitter struggle against it for nine hundred years, now the Buddhists seemed to have laid down their weapons. Disillusionment might be a possible reason, but their efforts have not gone completely in vain."

Rohan- "Jai, I agree with you. At Sinhala, though we could not eradicate the caste system completely, much of its cruelty and inhumanity, the kind we see in India is a thing of the past now. Most of the credit for this goes to Buddhism."

Jai- "If you manage to retain the courage to go the full distance, you might be able to eradicate the caste system altogether at Yava."

Rohan- "And we are somewhat advantaged vis-a-vis Indians because we are guided by Buddhist monks since the moment we are born, so we are spared the smokescreen of brahminical myths and the internal conflicts that Indians who convert to Buddhism must inevitably go through."

Arjun- "Having thought about it deeply, I have begun to realize that brahmins' religion can never become the basis for the ascendancy of a nation. For non-Indic nations in particularly, it is nothing less than a poison to sap the spirits and initiative of its people."

Jai- "Careful Arjun! If our kings were to hear your thoughts, they would relish torturing you to an uncelebrated death."

Our voyage lasted five days. Food was cooked on the deck. It was great fun to watch some brahmins from Kaveripattanam cook their food. They are strictly forbidden to eat any food cooked by non-brahmins or to set up stove anywhere except on dry earth. I loved to pick on them; how could they possibly observe their strict caste rules while at sea. They would declare grandly- "while on the ship, wood may be considered the same as earth." It is their own scripture after all, open to interpretation in the manner that suited them.

I could not but be reminded of my fateful voyage from Tamralipti. The sea was calm today, but it had been calm that day too, till the storm hit us. It is likely that if that shipwreck had not occurred I would have reached Tamralipti much earlier. But in retrospect I do not think that the eighteen months spent at the Shabar village went in vain; in fact it was an invaluable experience that added to my knowledge about how the human mind works. It was around noon time that Sinhala appeared on the horizon, one could see thousands of palm trees capping the landscape. By late afternoon we set feet on land.

The weather was extremely hot. Except for palm trees and some wild trees, the terrain seemed to have little except sand and pebbles. The women wore nothing except a piece of linen below their waists; this was true even of women from affluent families but seeing half naked bodies did not surprise me anymore. On the outskirt of the settlement there was a well endowed monastery where around two hundred monks resided. But we did not feel like visiting it yet. The settlement had a number of inns and eateries for travellers. Though we did not hope to reach Anuradhapur, the capital of Sinhala the same day, we set foot straightaway; particularly because it wasn't dark yet. Arjun had to return to Yavadvipa but we had become such good friends now that he too decided to come along to see Anuradhapur and spend some more time with us.

This was Rohan's own country. I too did not the face language barrier here. I was dressed like an affluent citizen of Patliputra. It did not take me long to realize that people here too are in awe of Patliputra's customs and manners. In any case Sinhalese seemed very similar to Magadhan.

We came across Dravidians too; they were mostly merchants and artisans: That evening we stayed at an inn by the highway. The royal clan and the rich merchants have constructed a number of inns by the highway for the convenience of the travellers. The next day we arrived at Anuradhapur.

Anuradhapur i[illegible]he oldest and biggest city of Sinhala. It is different from Kanchi in having numerous Buddhist monasteries and temples. Roads are clean and well maintained. Big halls have been constructed at the city for Buddhist monks to give sermons to the lay followers. Every Ashtami, full moon night and new moon night monks have huge congregations happen here to listen to sermons. There is a lot of devotion for Buddhism among the people of Sinhala, but this does not mean that the ruling class here is particularly disposed towards the welfare of its subjects.The lifestyle of kings and the royal clan here is as lavish as their brethren in India, so the common folk are extremely poor. Rohangiri yields precious

gems like Ruby and Sapphire in abundance but they usually adorn the bodies of only rich merchants and lords. But I must say at least as much in the praise of kings of this land, they have built huge water bodies for the welfare of the subjects. These water bodies called Vapis are used to irrigate the farm lands. I thought probably it would not be easy to construct such water bodies in the Yaudheya land because we lack the undulating topography necessary for building canals. There are a number of such Vapis near Anuradhapur and water is brought to the city through canals. I don't think too many countries can boast of as many viharas and chaityas as there are here. The Chaityas at Ratnamalya and Abhayagiri are so big that they resemble small hills. Millions of dinars have been spent to decorate them. Every morning and evening thousands of lay followers gather here with flowers and garlands to offer worship.

We did not need to put up at some inn; Rohan let us stay at his house as his guests. By now I could barely remember what had brought me to Sinhala. I had made the decision to come here in course of my discussions with Acharya Vasubandhu, but ages seemed to have gone by since then and I wasn't the same person anymore. Why was I here then? I can just say that I kept putting one foot after another and one day found myself here. Perhaps there was an as yet, unsatiated spirit of nomadism somewhere deep inside my heart that did not let me settle down at any one place for too long. Perhaps this is the reason why I was here. If I hadn't been governed by certain reasons, perhaps I would have liked to travel to the same places as the itinerant protagonist of Kulapa's stories. Anuradhapur was barely any different from the numerous other cities I had been to. True its huge Vapis and big Chaityas distinguished it to an extent but in all the other ways it was more or less the same as cities like Patliputra and Kanchi. The same lanes and markets with perfumeries, jewellers and brothels. Though I still roamed about the city squares but they had no special attraction for me anymore.

In about a week's time Arjuna left for his country. Now there were just the two of us, Rohan and me. Rohan was a very simple young man; it is difficult to tell what was he interested in but wherever I went, he was always ready to give me company. If there was one thing he seemed to be interested in, it was narrating the story of how his parents had arrived to this island- 'their ship had got lost at the sea, and then they had reached this shore and set foot on this land.

Then the island was owned by the dark skinned who were its original inhabitants. Some young girl from among them fell in love with the headmen of the newly arrived and she gave away all of their secrets. This

led to their defeat and the island passed into the hands of Sinhalas. I thanked my luck that I hadn't used my love for Shyama to bring ruin to her people. Rohan would often say that someday he would like to take me to the southern part of the island where the descendants of the defeated dark skinned people still live independently. That they have managed to survive is not because of Sinhalas' charity, but because this island is so huge that vast areas of it are still unexplored.

Love or Sacrifice

Occasionally I would visit the scholars at Mahavihar and Abhaygiri to discuss philosophy. Acharya had told me that Tathagata had modelled the Bhikshu Sangha after the structure of Licchavis' state and its rules of conduct were the same as the ones practised by the ancient republic. The Licchavis had ceased to be a republic a long time ago so there was no hope of learning anything from them. I wanted to learn these rules of conduct from the Buddhist Sangha; but I was aware of their strict rule that these laws may only be taught to a member of the Sangha. I was by now mentally prepared to be a monk; so one day I presented myself to Sthavir Suman, the supreme leader of Mahavihāra. Having enquired about my family-clan he said- "I am very happy to know that you are a scion of the Yaudheya clan. But are you aware that you need your parents' permission to be accepted within the sangha?"

"Bhante, my mother passed away before I reached my first birthday; as for my father, I have taken his permission."

"May you lead a long life! But I cannot accept you within the sangha on my own. Only the sangha has the right to accept an individual as its member, but from what I have heard about your background, I do not think that they should have any objection."

"But Bhante! You are the supreme leader of fifty thousand Bhikshus of Sinhala."

"I am the supreme leader of the sangha but not its king. I am bound by the collective will of the sangha. To be a Bhikshu means to be a member of the sangha and every member of the sangha has the same rights and duties as any other member, young or old. Dear Jai! Have you been a follower of any other religion earlier?"

"No Bhante, my clan has always been Buddhist."

"In that case Jai, I will call a Sannipat (get-together) of the sangha. It will test you before giving its assent."

After a few days the Sannipat was called. My friend Rohan provided the necessary items for a person to become a monk—three robes, one steel begging bowl, a razor, a needle, another bowl to carry water and a belt. The sangha met in a huge hall, seated on the floor. The supreme leader Suman was seated at the front of the rows of monks. I was presented to the sangha. One monk asked me on behalf of the sangha- "Dear Jai, do you carry some hereditary disease like leprosy?"

"No", I answered.

"Are you a man?"

"Yes, bhante."

"Are you a slave?"

"No, bhante."

"Are you in debt?."

"No, bhante."

"Have your parents, mother or father consented to your joining the sangha?"

"Yes, bhante."

"Are you over twenty years old?"

"Yes, bhante."

"You possess bowl-robes etc?"

"Yes, bhante."

After this the said monk told me several things that I needed to say before the sangha. Then he asked me to bow before the sangha and said - "Dear Jai, may you lead a long life. This is your moment of truth. Use your conscience and answer the questions that follow- say yes if your answer is yes or else say no."

Then he addressed the sangha and said- "Bhante sangha! Listen to me. Jai desires to be a monk."

I bowed before the sangha and said- "Bhante, I ask the sangha for Upsampada (monkhood). I pray to the sangha to bless my request."

I repeated these words three times. This was followed by more questions. Then the sangha informed me that for the journey of my life I may rely on the following four things- "(1)You may beg for food, you may also accept a meal when invited by someone; you may sew your robes out of old discarded clothes or robes given away in charity; the robe may be made out of tree bark (2) it may also be a robe made out of cotton, fleece or silk. (3) You may rest underneath a tree or reside at a vihara if it's available

in the vicinity (4) Upon falling sick medicine made out of cow urine would be your cure; apart from this you may also consume ghee, butter, oil, honey, jaggery if these are offered in charity."

I observed that as an institution, the sangha was similar to our republic in many ways. I studied the Bhikshus' code of conduct (Vinay) very carefully. A lot of care had been taken to prevent authority from slipping into any one individual's hands. Except for the eight items mentioned above, no Bhikshu was allowed to own any private property. I was deeply saddened to learn that this rule was infact not being followed strictly; a number of monks at Abhayagiri and elsewhere kept and maintained private properties. Bhadant Suman wasn't among them.

When I asked him about the open flouting of this rule by monks he said- "Dear Jai, this is a very evil practice. Lord Buddha had advised that whatever little one is able to acquire in one's begging bowl must be shared with all other brother monks. But there isn't much that we can do about this situation. The king keeps devising ever more novel means to accumulate as much wealth in his coffers as he can; various taxes like the land revenue, salt tax, sales tax are imposed by the royal administration upon the subjects. Merchants and tradesmen too are busy fattening their wallets by impoverishing the masses through every means possible. Because the masses have been rendered so poor, most of our charity comes from the king, his lords and the rich merchants. It often happens that these patrons instead of making donation to the entire Sangha, bestow their gifts upon any one of the monks they happen to favour and the Sangha is helpless in this regard, it cannot stop them from doing so as they are men of considerable power and influence."

"Meaning Bhante, the Sangha is unable to enforce its laws because it lacks the state power, which is unfortunately wielded by the very men who are most responsible for flouting these laws."

After I became a monk I decided to eat only through begging. Though it wasn't easy the first day to go out wearing a robe and bowl in the hand, begging strangers for food. I had never begged in my life. But when I saw Bhadanta Suman heading out of the monastery bowl in his hand, I decided to follow him and do whatever he did. At the first household we reached, when my turn came, the lady put boiled rice, fish and some vegetables into my bowl and then bowed to greet me. After that it was easy for me; soon we were able to gather enough food and returned to our vihara. All of us put the food we had received before Bhadanta Suman; it was first sent to the old and sick monks in the monastery. Then the rest was divided up equally among all of us, I really liked this egalitarian way of gathering and distributing food.

Hardly a month had passed at the monastery when the news of ajjuka's death arrived through some itinerant merchant. This was a terrible blow; nothing it seemed could give solace to me. It was difficult to stop tears and I did not want the rest of the monks to see me in this state. So I sought Bhadanta Suman's permission and left for Chaitya Parvat (Mihittale) for a few days. Around forty kilometers from Anuradhapur, it is the same mountain where Ashoka's son Bhikshu Mahendra used to reside. Though it is not as deserted a place now as it used to be during his time, hundreds of Bhikshus reside here now; it is still good enough for monks seeking isolation. Except for the afternoons when I went out to beg, I spent all my time inside my cave. The rest of the monks must have thought that I am engaged in deep meditation; they had no idea that I was in fact being alone to hide my tears.

I do not remember my mother's face, father's death had upset me deeply but even his loss was nothing compared to ajjuka's passing away. I wasn't born from her womb, but ajjuka had loved me more than her own sons. The very thought that I would not be able to see her face again would rend my heart and my eyes would begin to swell up. I remained in this state for over a month. Then the intensity of my pain began to subside somewhat and I returned to Anuradhapur.

Now my head was tonsured, I wore a robe sewn out of old rags and my feet were naked. In other words the attire of a monk seemed designed to make a man look unattractive to the fairer sex, but somehow it did not work in my case. In fact each one of these elements seemed to enhance my natural gifts of youth and good looks. I visited the same markets as the rest of my fellow monks but inevitably when we came back my bowl would be full with ghee (clarified butter), pork cooked in spices, treats of various sorts, sweet bread etc whereas my brother monks rarely managed to acquire anything more than boiled rice and bland vegetables. I would keep changing the market where I went to beg, hoping that a new face would attract less attention but the same pattern repeated everywhere.

How many times could I change location?

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By the end of the second year of my stay, I left Sinhala. I had learnt that emperor Samudra Gupta had passed away. His eldest son Rama Gupta had been coronated after him but he could not rule for too long, soon he was executed by Chandra Gupta who now ascended the throne himself. Chandra Gupta's rise to power had filled me with ominous feelings about what the future had in store for the Yaudheya republic. I had observed Chandra Gupta very closely since his childhood up to youth. I was aware of his dark intentions and overweening ambitions; he admired Chankya

and Chandra Gupta Maurya. I heard several versions of how he had assassinated Rama Gupta and married his wife Dhruva Devi. I had not seen this woman because till the time I left Patliputra, Rama Gupta had not married any princess by this name. But there were rumours galore about this women in the marketplace—some said that she was a Naga Kanya, other believed that she was a celestial beauty, a Gandharvi or Apsara in human form, and there were yet others who compared her beauty to Rambha, Tilottama and Urvashi. I did not want to accept anything of what I heard through the grapevine and decided to reserve my judgement till I met Chandra and her in person. I could not have remained away from the Yaudheya land after hearing of his accession.

I have written above that the monks attire had not diminished the charms of my youth a bit. Whichever alley I chose to beg in, most of my patrons were women, particularly those who were relatively more confident about their beauty. I tried keeping my gaze down, staring at the floor while talking to them or receiving alms but my aloofness seemed only to further stoke their curiosity. Whenever my eyes met theirs I sensed hopes and expectations in their eyes; hopes and expectations I could not have fulfilled. My fellow monks knew that I was a scholar. It was a custom in Sinhala to hold public sermons at the royal palaces, markets and other public places designated for mass religious gatherings. The Sangha ordered me to hold sermons at the royal palace but I requested to be sent to an inn at one of the city squares instead. This inn must have been a merchant's shop sometime, but now it had been converted into a beautiful inn which primarily served the purpose of holding religious gatherings. Rich city merchants have endowed it liberally, so that now it has beautiful pillars embellished with exquisite carvings. The roof was casted with copper with gold platings. The seat of the preacher itself was made out of sandalwood; during sermons festoons embellished with pearl garlands were hung upon it. These sermons would begin at first hour of night and at times continued till break of dawn. I too would give hours long sermons here; most of the times reading out from the scriptures mechanically but it is possible that my commentary reflected some of my personal thoughts. I noticed that middle aged and young merchants' wives and daughters would listen to my sermons with rapt attention. Hardly anyone of them seemed sleepy even when my sermon lasted hours, though it was common for women to doze off listening to these nightly sermons. For quite some while I felt quite happy about the success of my sermons. It was customary of women to be on Uposath fast during these sermons so they could not put flowers in their bun or put on too much make up or ornaments, but these restrictions did not affect those in possession of natural beauty.

Uposath fast also required them to cover their upper bodies with a piece of cloth but younger among them did not care for this custom much. A preacher cannot keep his eyes running over the mass of his audience all the while; his eyes tend to rest at some specific point at short intervals. For me such a point was the base of one of the pillars in the hall. That is where my running gaze would stop to rest. In the beginning I was under the impression that new faces turn up every day. But it did not take me very long to realize that same faces were seen on the same spot night after night. Every audience has the right to stare continuously at the face of the speaker while he speaks, so it is impossible to fathom what sentiments lie hidden beneath a fixed gaze. Among those faces was a young woman whose long dark hair spread over her fair face made it look like the moon hidden underneath dark clouds. Her big round eyes, her thin lips, her two long eyebrows shaped like a bow and cheeks smooth as marble made her a dazzling beauty. She might have been around twenty years old. After about seven-eight sermons I realized that so long as I spoke, her eyes did not for a moment wave from my face. I concluded that she was a curious and intelligent woman eager to learn from what I said. It is customary for lay Buddhists to offer prayers and seek salvation from the sangha every Ashtami, Amawasya and on a full moon nights. This young woman-married to a prominent merchant of Anuradhapur—visited the vihara on regular basis with loads of gifts. She seemed particularly devoted towards me but my fellow monks and I both were under the impression that my prowess as a religious commentator was the reason. It was natural for good preachers to command respect among lay followers.

After some months has passed, one day a slave girl came to our vihara and said that this young lady is very unwell and she has requested me to come over to her house along with four other monks to hold a Paritrana (chanting of Buddha's sermons). So we took permission from the vihara and visited her house. The holy earthen pot was set up, thread spun out of cotton and the five of us started the reading of Buddha's Sutras. Within three-four days we were informed that our patron lady's health was improving. Paritrana Deshna lasted a month. All this while we were served meat-fish and other excellent cuisines prepared at our patron's kitchen. She would serve food to us herself. Deshna would be done during daytime after which we would come back to our vihara for the night, returning again the next morning. Our patron lady's insightful questions reflected that she was indeed a clever woman and had studied Buddha's sermons carefully. She rarely had any questions about the norm of religious conduct, rites and rituals. In fact most of her questions were about Buddhist philosophy and deeper meaning of life- Pratitya Samutpada (destruction

and creation of phenomenon), Anatmavada (Buddhist proposition that there is no soul), Nirvana etc. My own opinions about these issues were still intact but I had to reply to her queries as a Buddhist monk would. About Nirvana she said- "There is nothing such as a soul Bhante! I do not have the slightest doubt about this. There is no soul, what exists is a flow of consciousness; a drifting stream of thoughts and ideas which are in perpetual flux, constantly being born and dying. The idea of this stream of thoughts in constant motion makes apparent the basic unity of all phenomena; Nirvana is the state in which this flow comes to a standstill. Bhante! Have I understood correctly?"

"Yes, Upasika (a lay Buddhist), you are right."

"If Nirvana means motionlessness, lack of gain or loss then does it not mean that we must concentrate all our attention on here and now, our lives before attaining the Nirvana?"

"You are right Upasika."

"Bhante! I wonder, is this world just a vale of tears, is there nothing in this life except for sorrow?"

"Upasika! Lord himself said once, if our lives had nothing except sorrow then no individual would have wanted to live even for a moment."

Somewhat elated at my reply she said to me- "Bhante, generally monks here do not allow such questions. Since you are from Jambudvipa (India), you are different, you listen carefully to my queries and remove my doubts through your lucid replies."

"Restraining oneself from clarifying one's doubts is not very healthy. There is no place for blind faith in Buddha's religion."

"Bhante, I have been reading the Lord's teachings since I was a child and I felt the same as you do. Our experience teaches us that this world isn't just a vale of tears, our reason confirms this too. This is the right way to approach our lives. Am I right?"

"Yes Upasika, you are right."

Upsika's devotion for me kept increasing. Her merchant husband was very successful in running his overseas trade, accumulating wealth was his only pastime and he was very good at it; but he was an imbecile in most other matters. Seeing his wife's devotion, he too began to visit me occasionally. I do not know how much of our conversation he could grasp, but it did not take him very long to realize that Bhadant Jai is an eminent scholar. Perhaps he had also begun to believe that I was an accomplished yogi and perhaps possessed occult powers. His wife was looked upon as a scholar herself among the wives of the merchants of Anuradhapur, she was also friends with some ladies in the royal harem. The result of her

devotion and praise was that within a few months I began to be counted among the most revered and learned monks of Anuradhapur. Devotees loved to shower lavish gifts upon me- robes, food and other gifts, I would promptly send all of it to the common store of our vihara. One day the merchant's wife brought a very fine robe made out of Chinese silk for me; bright red in colour. She said- "Bhante, this beautiful silk cloth has just arrived from China. I have sewn this robe out of it with my own hands. Bhante! please oblige this humble devotee by accepting this gift."

I said- "Upasika, I cannot accept this expensive garment. I only wear robes made out of rags discarded by people and sewn with my own hands."

Upasika began to insist but when I absolutely refused to accept it, she said- "Bhante, please at least wear it once for me, one look at you wearing this robe would oblige this humble servant of yours. I did not want to be excessively harsh to her, so I went to the next room and came out wearing it. She looked at me brimming wobbly eyes and said beaming with happiness- "I am blessed Bhante! I just wanted to see how would lord Buddha look if he were to wear this robe. My eyes are sated now."

I did not like this sort of flattery but I was aware that such excessive admiration is not unusual among lay followers, so I kept quiet. Though I refused to wear new robes flatly, gradually she made me agree that I should eat my meals at her house. She donated so much money to the vihara that the monks would always be ready to respect her requests. When I initially refused to accept her request my fellow monks began to say "He must respect the pleas of this devout lady or sangha's revenues would be affected."

I knew that it was considered nothing less than a crime on part of a monk to hinder the revenues of the vihara and I had no intention to get into a debate over whether or not I was affecting it by not accepting meals at her house. So I accepted her invitation and began to eat my afternoon meals at her house daily.

I really believe that at least in the beginning the Upasika had nothing except devotion in her heart. I think she was as much impressed with my learning and ability as my simple lifestyle and scrupulousness. But when I began to visit her house daily for lunch we would get hours to spend time together. It is difficult to tell when exactly her devotion transformed into love. But I must add this here that she displayed remarkable self restraint. But its result was that she would hardly speak now and she stopped asking questions. All she did now was to quietly sit near me while I ate. Everyday she would prepare new dishes for me. At Anuradhapur—and this is true of the whole of Sinhala—it's never wintertime. Slightly less during the rainy season but otherwise all twelve months of the year it's

summer. Often while I ate she would steal a glance at me and at times I would look back at her too. In her big eyes I would see a strange self absorbed beauty. Then I thought that may be this is a sign of a mind absorbed in religion.

The merchant had gone to Champak (Champa) with a fleet of several ships filled with merchandize. I was still visiting her house daily for afternoon meals.That day again, like everyday the Upasika requested me to rest awhile. Whenever I stayed back at her house to rest, a slave would be sent to fan me. Today the Upasika came and sat next to me herself to fan me. Seeing her startled and I sat up. The Upasika on the other hand looked heart broken and began to cry inconsolably. Anxious I asked- "Is something the matter Upasika? Why are you so upset?"

"Let me cry Bhante, I have restrained myself for many months now. Women possess greater intensity of passions than men, but nature has also given them hesitation in the equal measure. I am not sure when or how this happened but allow me to admit it today Bhante, I have been madly in love with you for many months now."

I was never enamoured by renunciation or penance, my life philosophy never considered these essential for self development. But I had certain self imposed rules which I strictly tried to abide by. It was not that I wasn't attracted towards the fairer sex. Neither would it be true to say that I was never afflicted by carnal passions. But I did not want to lead a dual life, a hidden personal self and a different public image; in other words I did not want to be hypocritical. So I said to the Upasika- "Bhandre, I do not consider renunciation and celibacy very healthy. Neither do I believe that there is some supreme being sitting in the heaven to judge our good or bad deeds. I do not believe even in rebirth or afterlife. Despite such thoughts I would still say that we must not get involved with each other."

As I was saying this the Upasika had begun to look somewhat relieved and she had stopped crying but after I finished, she once again began to seem despondent. Despite this she managed to restrain her tears now and said rather calmly-."I accept nothing till my reason accepts it. Customary morality does not make much sense to me. Do you know how old I am?"

"I would easily have thought you to be sixteen or seventeen but your wisdom and level of intellect reflect that you cannot be any less than at least twenty years old."

"You are in fact wrong, I am twenty five years old. And what would you say about my beauty?"

"You would without doubt be counted among the prettiest in any country."

"Bhrigukachcha is famous for its beauties of Shaka and Greek descent. I was considered the prettiest woman in the city before I got married. My father was an ordinary merchant. My merchant husband has trading enterprises at Bhrigukachcha as well. When he expressed the desire to marry me, my father agreed readily. Brides have no say in choosing their grooms. But in all probability, given a choice, I would not have refused. True, the merchant was twelve-fourteen years elder to me, he was still healthy, neither was he past his youth-I was seventeen years old then. Master of an immense wealth, he could provide everything that a young girl could desire. But one thing that money could not buy and he could not provide was marital bliss."

"Was your husband in love with some other woman?"

"No, he wasn't, but he hardly ever spent any time with me. For a very long time I was under the impression that he was observing the Uposatha fast. He told me that some great man had prescribed it to him as a cure for childlessness from his last marriage. I bought this excuse for a very long time. At times some of his friends would come over. They had been given full freedom to meet me even in his absence. Because my husband had asked me to do so, I would serve them drinks whenever they dropped in, at times at their request I would sing a song or two because I did not want to offend them. But one evening one among them-whom I must admit was relatively better looking- began to make unsolicited advances. So from that day I stopped entertaining their company at my house. When my husband returned I told him about everything that had happened but to my surprise he merely laughed and dismissed the issue."

"A strange man!" I said.

"By now I had lost my cool and began to shout at him. But he retained his calm and said 'Bhadre! There is no need for you to lose your cool. I married you to perpetuate my dynasty, otherwise this vast wealth I have accumulated would be appropriated by the Crown once I am dead.' This irritated me further and I said- 'In that case you are not doing much to ensure that you get a successor. Why do you keep running away from me?' His reply was astonishing- 'I lack manhood. I cannot give you a child myself.' This came as a terrible blow to me. I was so angry that I wanted to strangle him that very moment. But somehow I stopped myself. I had the choice to legally divorce him, as per the royal law but I preferred not to do it."

"That would not have been a wrong decision."

"I agree with you but then I had a lot of deference for the life of a nun. I decided to spend the rest of my life as a celibate. Eight years have passed since our marriage and not once did I let my emotions get better of me, until now."

"Then why won't you remain steadfast on your resolve now?"

"Now there is no strength left in my resolve. I have grown weaker with time. It would have been better for all of us if I had not gone for your Dharmadeshna. I would feel the urge to see you, talk to you again and again. For a very long time I kept convincing myself that my thoughts are pure and that this is nothing more than devotion for a great soul. But now I have begun to realize that we cannot deceive ourselves forever and sooner or later one must come face to face with what lies in the heart."

I laughed a bit now and said- "You are right, we cannot deceive ourselves."

"Yes, we cannot. Now it seems that passions consigned to the depth of my heart crash against its walls with greater intensity than ever before. I feel helpless against this accumulated force. When I saw you wearing the silk robe, my eyes had swelled up. I am sure you must have understood what my tears implied."

"I did not give it much thought. From the sort of philosophical curiosity you had, I never thought that things would come to this."

"So then you think me to be a fallen woman?"

"I cannot look upon any woman as fallen, though of course I think that men are often guilty of being so."

"Why this bias against men?"

"Because in our society, as it exists, today women are not the masters of their own destinies. Men decide upon their fates and treat them just as they please. Who condemned you to this life of slavery?"

"Men did."

"An age old custom gives you the right to divorce your impotent husband and yet you remained faithful to him for eight long years. What happens if you decide to leave him to be with another man? People will forget all these years of your devotion to a husband you did not choose and brand you as characterless. Hypocritical as this society is, I cannot even dream of thinking you to be a fallen woman."

"Now as I recall these eight years of my life, being the wife of a man whom I did not love, I cannot think of a single instance or incident of which I ought to feel ashamed except the weakness that got better of me today."

"I would not call this weakness."

Apparently elated at this reply, she now embraced me and said, "My dearest!"

Very gently I pulled myself away and said to her- "Pretty! Do not be so impatient, first listen to what I have got to say."

Colour draining from her face, she stared at my face as I said- "I do not believe in the institution of marriage. I think that among the ancients this institution did not exist and in future too, a time may come when it would cease to exist."

"You mean you believe in free love?"

"Yes free love, I do not consider it to be bad."

"Really!"

"Yes, but I also believe that free love may only exist in a free society. In today's world, the majority is enslaved, so free love is not good for the present society."

"Not good?"

"Kings and emperors indulge in free love, do they not? He can make love to any of his lords, officials or city merchants' wives and none may refuse him."

"Of course they cannot refuse. In fact they consider such an eventuality their good fortune as it usually translates into a high rank in the court and increase in power and wealth."

"And all hell breaks loose upon a person who thinks of denying the king. But why would they refuse? Behind the drawn curtains, the king, the lords and the courtiers do not care for any restrictions imposed by the institution of marriage. But can we call this free love? This isn't what I had in my mind when I said that I approve of free love."

"So..." she said as much and sighed.

"If our age was suitable for free love, I would not have disappointed you."

"Is this a polite way of saying that you are rejecting my love."

"By using the word rejecting, you are accusing me of insulting your dignity as a woman."

"You could easily escape this charge by accepting me as your lover."

"I am extremely sorry but that is not possible. I live by certain self imposed rules. We would have to keep our affair discreet; you think we would be able to live with dignity if we had to do that?"

"Do you think my love is momentary? I am ready to leave everything behind and come along with you."

"You cannot come with me. I am saying this for your sake, for I am not certain myself, which direction my tortuous life would lead me into. I promise you that so long as I am at Anuradhapur I would keep coming to see you but we cannot be together. Please try to understand, this is in the interest of both of us."

I came back to the vihara. I wasn't unaware of the fact that a number of monks were in fact secretly having affairs with their patrons' wives. A number of nuns too had discreet lovers. I did not want to be like them. I had decided that if I ever fell in love, it would not be secret, hidden from the sight of the world.

I was still contemplating over my future course of action when the news of Chandra Gupta's coronation arrived. I decided that the Yaudheya land needed my services now.

A New Friend

I boarded a ship to Shurparka. Though I was still dressed as a monk my faith in the life of monkhood was by now much shaken. Shurparka is situated on the Arabian sea coast. In the past Shurparka, like Tamralipti in the east, had been the largest port on the west coast, but now there were several other rival ports. Shurparka itself lies in the kingdom of Vakataka king Vidarbharaja Prithvisen. The kingdom had seen better days but now it was in decline. Its crumbling administration and military seemed helpless against numerous robber-bands which infested the highways of their realm. So for my journey towards north I had to take a much longer route to avoid these dangerous highways. After travelling about a hundred miles south of Shurparka, I reached a big Vihara (at Kaneri). It has hundreds of rooms and a huge congregation hall, all carved into mountains. The congregation hall itself is so huge that it can accommodate thousands of persons at a time. It is amazing how such huge structures could be carved out of mountains. Such impressive architecture usually stimulates the wild imagination of the naive; stories are rife about how the Maya monsters had themselves carved these with their bare hands. It is apparent that the monks here enjoyed the patronage of the kings and the deference of rich merchants; immense amount of wealth must have been required to carve such huge palaces out of this barren mountainous wilderness. Outside the Chaitya stand statues of the four donors who helped finance its construction- two men and two women. Barely two centuries have passed

since its construction and the local population is well aware of the identities of the donors who financed these but by the time you reach Sinhala or Gandhara, folklore transforms them into terrible monsters and devils. The most remarkable thing about the construction of this vihara is that beneath it lies a huge vault for storing rainwater. Thanks to its presence the inhabitants enjoy clean drinking water throughout the year. But for its presence, nobody could have lived here as the streams in the vicinity carry water only during the monsoon season. Beautiful statues are engraved on the walls of the caves, some of which are outstanding pieces of art. The monks who reside here are renowned for their love of knowledge and strict adherence to the Vinaya codes. It is said that Bodhisattva (a previous incarnation of Buddha) had been born as a cobra prince. He sacrificed his life by offering himself as food to a Garuda (a mythical carnivorous bird) to save his kin's lives. This chaitya is built on the same location where he is said to have lived.

It took me almost two years to reach Pratishthana (Jhusi) after I left Sinhala. These two years were spent roaming about in the kingdoms of Vakatakas (Vidarbha) and Mahakstrapa (Malava). Both of these had been defeated by Samudragupta in the past, in fact Vakataka king Rudrasena had been killed in the battlefield. But Samudragupta did not abolish these two dynasties; he had let them rule under his suzerainty. In his old age his control over the empire had become lax, taking advantage of which the two kingdoms had asserted their independence once again. Vakataka had been a very powerful kingdom once, stretching from the bank of Narmada to Krishna. South of it Pallavas of Kanchi hold their sway. Uttarapatha (Punjab) is still ruled by Devaputrashahi Kushanas, Gupta's rule in the east and Mahakstrapas over Malwa and Gujarat. Hemmed in by these five huge kingdoms, Yaudheyas are the only people who have still kept the republican tradition alive. On my way, I also visited the cave Viharas built during the time of Andhra kings. Many of these still have inscriptions extant from the time of Andhra kings like Vashisthiputa Pulumayi (154 AD), Yagya Satakarni etc. It's a mere four-five hundred years since these were built and already there are stories about how gods and demons themselves descended from the heavens to build them. One can only imagine what sort of myths and legends would be forged by the future generations.

On my way up north I also spent some months at Ujjayini. Shakas have taken a lot of pain to decorate their capital. Though they had been independent for past few years, Chandragupta's recent victories over Devaputrashahis has made an attack imminent. Now the Mahakshtrapa is trying to just to strengthen his army and treasury but also to keep his

forever recalcitrant subjects satisfied. Avantipuri's royal palace has never been as small and austere in the recent memory as it is now under the present king Rudra Singh. In the north there is constant trouble from the Malava republic. This republic has long lost its independence to the Shaka king but it seldom lets go of an opportunity to try and overthrow the dominion of Mahakshtrapa whenever it feels that the king might be in a vulnerable position. Rudra Singh has been very accommodating towards Malavas lately in the wake of the looming threat of a Gupta's invasion. Vakatakas have gobbled up some of the Shaka territory and so the relations between the two kingdoms are tensed. But the Mahakstrapa would dare not make a move against the Vakatakas yet because a war between the two is just the sort of opportunity Chandragupta is waiting for to invade the Shaka kingdom.

I was not in a hurry to return to the Yaudheya land. It would not do any harm to wander about for a bit and ascertain how the balance of power between our neighbouring kingdoms was poised. Pallavas were too far off and they had nothing to do with the Guptas so I did not need to take them into account in my calculations. Buddhist Bhikshus prefer to stay away from politics, centuries of experience has taught them that kings and emperors are like shooting stars and it is never wise to tie one's fortunes with any one of them. But despite this, one may get to know of all sorts of national and international political developments at a Buddhist monastery as itinerant monks from all countries come and go there. The monastery at Ujjayini where I settled down for now had monks from Tushar, Kustan (Khotan), Persia, Sinhala, Yavadvipa and even lands as far off as China. Many among them were in fact royal princes stripped off their inheritance and forced to become political refugees on the run. It is hardly surprising that kings considered this aspect of the Buddhist monasteries a threat and kept them under close surveillance. A number of spies have been planted in the disguise of monks. Since my departure from Sinhala, I had little faith left in the Buddhist order but I still wore the robe to conceal my identity. I rarely shared my thoughts with anyone but kept my ears and eyes open for any new information or news that might come my way. Being a monk from Sinhala who are known for strict adherence to the monks' code of conduct I was looked upon with respect by other monks here. Many others thought that I was a foreigner which I believe helped me escape the attention of spies somewhat. Gradually, it became apparent that I was well versed in philosophy. Though I preferred not to let it be known that I was disciple of Vasubandhu because I thought this might attract unwarrented attention towards me. But I started teaching Vinaya to some students. One among them was Madhavasena.

Madhavasena was a kshatriya from the Malava republic. He had a muscular, well built body and sharp intellect. As he came of age, an acute sense of renunciation overwhelmed him and he decided to become a monk. He was an eager student and seemed keen on learning and following every rule of conduct prescribed by Tathagata. The region around Avanti was under the influence of Mahayana sect, meaning that there was a great deal of laxity in terms of following the exact rules of Vinaya. Gradually Madhav and I became very close friends. If we hadn't become such good friends, I would never have dared to open up to him so much, nor his zeal for renunciation would have allowed him to take my 'worldly' wisdom seriously! The Bhikshu Sangha and its Vinaya had the stamp of republicanism all over it. My tactic was to arouse the curiosity of my students while teaching; and when they asked questions, I would introduced my own ideas on the sly. But I took every care not to relate these ideas directly to the current political situation. Later Madhava remarked once- "Brother Jai, then it would seem to us that instead of teaching us about Nirvana, you are describing the outline of the republican system and yet none of us could ever guess that you were in fact a Yaudheya partisan."

"Madhav! I had to be careful, you know fully well that our Vihara was teeming with Kshtrapa, Vakataka and even Devaputrashahi spies. Yaudheyas live and talk like Yaudheyas all through their lives but if I had not introduced my ideas couched in the Buddhist terminology then most of you would have stopped attending my classes within a week."

"You are right Jai! Greed for other worldly glory had clouded my ability to reason. Now I understand what made me turn my back upon the real world; narrow selfishness and decadence of Malava leaders robbed our glorious republic of its independence. I had become so disillusioned that I began to feel that nothing worthwhile could be achieved in this world and, therefore, my calling lied in the pursuit of glory in the afterlife."

"Just as a pigeon faced with a cat shuts its eyes!" Is it not better to fight till the last breath instead of dying eyes closed?"

"It is always better to die trying."

"Generations after generations, young men have behaved like pigeons. If they had all died trying then this world could have been a much better place."

"They thought it more worthwhile to set their eyes upon the next world instead of bearing the onerous burden of making this world a better place. But brother Jai! I am grateful that you saved me from wasting my life in a vain pursuit."

During my year long stay at Avantipur I made two fruitful gains- accumulated assessment of the current political situation and a good friend like Madhavasena.

I was already beginning to get a whiff of Chandragupta's overweening ambitions. At the moment he was engaged in consolidating his position in Aryawarta (United Province). His neighbours already had a measure of the man they were dealing with. I was certain that once he manages to set his own house in order, he will fix his attention upon the erstwhile vassals who had declared autonomy. But I was more interested in ascertaining his attitude towards the Yaudheya republic so it would not be a bad idea to meet him once and gauge what he had in his mind.

Now Madhavasena was my closest companion. Having spent almost a year together, now we felt certain that our goals in life were the same. After departing from Avantipur, we arrived at the Mahavihara at Kaakanbot (Sanchi). The Chaityas here and the elaborately embellished gateways are such marvels of architecture that can easily captivate the attention of an artist. Such excellent works of art and sculpture are still being produced in all parts of the country that would hold us in good stead in the eyes of generations yet to come; but the feats achieved by artists at Sanchi merit special attention. Vidisha (Bhelsa) is not far from here. It is still renowned for the dexterity of its ivory workers. Five hundred years ago their ancestors had built a world famous gateway. This heritage wasn't just preserved but built upon by artists here. This art form has reached its zenith here at Sanchi; the art of sculpting female figures deserves special mention. These pieces of sculpture appear so real that one feels they might speak; while looking at them, one is reminded of Greek sculptors who added another level of sophistication to our extant tradition. Madhavasena said - "These art works are meant to inspire the spirit of Nirvana and renunciation among Bhikshus, why is it then that they carved such sensuous images of women on the walls?"

"What do you think the reason might be Madhav?"

"I guess people desire to leave solid earth and soar the skies of spiritual bliss but earth has a tendency to pull them back to the reality of the world they live in."

"These aesthetics are by far superior and real than the Nirvana they desire. And there is one more thing. Look at the imagery of women portrayed here, they reflect delicateness and femininity but these five hundred years old depictions of women also exude self respect and spirit of freedom."

"And the attire is very different too. Did women also wear turbans then?"

"Apparently yes. And you can also see how many bangles they wore in their hands and there are waistbands on the waists of all of them."

"No woman today would agree to wear so many anklets on their legs. Men too would not wear heavy earrings that hung up to their shoulders. I do not know how aesthetic that is."

"I have noticed that ornaments have a tendency to grow larger over time and then at some point people realize that they do not look nice anymore and stop wearing them. Change is an eternal law, it continues unabated. Women of Dasharsha Bundelkhanda are the descendents of these same women depicted here but their attire and ornaments are entirely different today. People can change almost entirely over a span of a few generations."

From Kakanabot we went to Vidisha and then proceeded towards east through Arikan (Airan). We came across another beautiful Chaitaya near Manidhar (Maihar). It is as well embellished with pieces of sculpture and gateways as Kakanabot. But among the hundreds of idols here we did not come across even a single statue of Buddha. Madhav asked - "Why are Buddha's idols absent here. Didn't they build Buddha's statues then?"

"You are right, Buddha's statues weren't built then. While reading Vinaya-Pitaka you must have noticed that Buddha's statues are nowhere mentioned in it. I noticed at Sinhala that when the Bhikshus congregate for prayers they do not worship any idol; in fact it is the Dharmasana that they worship. It is a small seat placed at the head of the congregation to represent Dharma (the law)."

"The images here depict the same, men and women are shown worshiping an empty seat. At other places they are depicted offering flowers to a Peepal tree."

"So now it is also proved that in an ever changing world religion too cannot remain eternal."

"But don't the brahmins say that religion has remained eternal through changing times?"

"You expect these shameless ones to hesitate from lying? Is their holy trio—Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh even mentioned in their ancient holy texts—the Vedas?" Today's brahmins are very different from the ones like Vashistha and Vishvamitra who created the vedas. The Guptas proudly proclaim that they are the protectors of cows and brahmins but cow protection and cow worship are not very old traditions."

"This is true. In fact in the Uttarapatha even today when a distinguished guest arrives, he is served a meal of beef, honey and milk as a sign of respect."

"This is why I say that brahmins are liars for saying that their religion has remained unchanged."

We reached Yamuna bank via Sahajatiya (Bhinta) and from there crossed the river on a boat to reach Pratisthana (Jhunsi).

Vikramaditya's Ambitions

Though I had come to Pratishthana with the intention of meeting Chandragupta, for the time being we decided to rest at the Vihara for a few days. Chandragupta had been the emperor for just four years but in this short duration he had proved that as a military strategist he was as skilled as his namesake from the past, emperor Chandragupta Maurya. As for his ability as a statesman, it had become apparent to his friends and foes alike that he would not embarrass his self chosen role model, master of statesmanship—Kautilya. Viharas, temples, taverns and even brothels—Chandragupta had planted his spies everywhere. Samudragupta was a warrior-conqueror; he was benevolent to his conquered foes. Through his successful military campaigns his empire had spread far and wide but he had never paid much attention to consolidating his conquests. No wonder, as soon as old age overcame him, almost all his conquered provinces outside Aryavarta declared independence. Chandragupta did not approve of such short lived conquests, neither was he to be satisfied with mere verbal professions of subservience. He wanted to build a consolidated and centralized administrative structure and had already begun laying firm foundations for the purpose in the entire region between Mathura and Pundravardhan (North-Bengal). Being the favourite disciple of Acharya Vasubandhu and the younger brother of Parambhattarika Datthadevi I was quite well known at Pratishthana, moreover there were several monks at the Vihara who were my past acquaintances so it was impossible that the news of my arrival would not reach Chandragupta.

As soon as he learnt of my arrival, Chandragupta came to the vihara with his wife Dhruvadevi and the commander in chief of the army, Virasena. Monks at the Vihara were astonished to see so many soldiers and royal attendants descend upon the monastery. As they approached my room, I heard the noise and came out. Chandragupta took off his crown, handed it over to one of the royal guards and said with folded hands - "Bhante! I feel like calling you uncle or Jai but your attire commands respect."

Dhruvadevi and Virasena bowed too. I was immediately invited over to the royal palace for lunch. Chandragupta wanted me to stay with him for some days. "I am very eager to share with you the happenings of the past nine years." He said.

So I went over to the royal palace at Pratishthana. Though Patliputra was still the capital, it was no longer the only seat of power. Chandragupta has been developing Pratisthana and Saket as alternate seats of royal power to consolidate his control over the provinces and he intended to develop Ujjayini too as such once the Shaka power was crushed. The old viceregal palace at Pratishthana was no longer there. The new royal palace that had come up in its stead had the stamp of imperial architecture seen at Patliputra. One thing needs to be mentioned here though; Chandragupta was not in favour of increasing expenditure on the maintenance of numerous palaces and harems. He was known to have famously quipped on one occasion- "I have no intention of imitating Dashratha and Krishna in maintaining sixteen thousand wives." He felt huge harems were a useless strain on the exchequer. Though he was not averse to marrying princesses from royal families for political gains. Dhruvadevi-whom Chandragupta affectionately called Dhruvaswamini was indeed a stunning beauty. I think my mention frequently cropped up in their conversations about Chandra's childhood. She had become Ramagupta's wife while ajjuka was still alive. She knew how much affection ajjuka held for her young brother who had become a wandering monk. And finally when she took to deathbed ajjuka could not stop talking about me; she would often say to Parambhattaraka- "Aryaputra! Please find my dear Jai for me. I want to see him once so that I can die in peace. Though nobody knew of my whereabouts, he would say to her- "Jai has gone away to a very distant land. I have sent riders to bring him, he would be here any day."

Dhruvaswamini had never met me before but she had heard enough to conclude that I was brave and wise and Chandra's closest childhood friend. There was one more reason for which Dhruvaswamini reserved special affection for me—she was a Malavika, a daughter of the Malava republic. She made sure that I should have all my meals at the royal palace, though I insisted upon returning to the Vihara at night. There Madhava and I would have discussions about the conversations I was having at the royal palace during the day. Dhruvaswamini would serve me food with her own hands. Chandragupta could not spend as much time with me as he was busy with state work, but Dhruvaswamini spent most of her time talking to me. Though technically I was her and Chandragupta's uncle, she treated me in same manner as Chandra—like a younger brother. She would often say "Dear Jai, give up this monk's robe now. I am sure that by now

you have accumulated enough good deeds to secure a seat in the heaven. If brave men like you spend their lives hankering after heavenly beauties then the beauties of this world would be forced to seek protection from meek men. Men who would not be upto the task.

I understood that whenever she said meek men she meant somebody like Ramagupta. Chandragupta liked to narrate to me how he had assassinated the Shaka emperor in his own palace. He would say - "Friend Jai! You know how headstrong and iron willed I can be but I had not imagined even in my wildest dreams that I would be forced to act so decisively at such an early stage in my life. You had yourself witnessed what father had become like in his old age, he had but two motivations left in his life—alcohol and women. Our enemies were growing bolder day by day and even the lowliest of our vassals were raising the standard of rebellion. The ranks of our ministers and commanders were filled with stupid nincompoops and flatterers. Able and energetic men were disillusioned and sitting idle. The Shaka emperor Devaputra had already been pressing upon our western borders, but finally when Parambhattaraka passed away, he launched a full fledged invasion. Ramagupta himself moved west to oversee the defence but like father, he was too immersed in women and wine to act decisively. Now, I am not against revelry, it is an important component of a fulfilling life but terrible fates await those who indulge in it without first paying for it in the full."

"Aren't these two objectives contradictory to each other?"

"Life itself is a bundle of contradictory impulses Jai. At a time when the fate of our empire hung in the balance and Ramagupta was supposed to lead from the front he still could not overcome his weakness for revelry. I was angry but helpless because he was the king. How could an army led by an inept leader like him be expected to put up a determined resistance? The Kshatrapa and the Vakatakas too were preparing to invade, so a big part of our existing troops had to be diverted to thwart them. Shakaraj entered deep inside our borders. Our inept commanders and the minister for war drew a very dismal picture of the state of affairs and convinced Ramagupta that we needed to beg for peace on any terms that our enemy would dictate to us. Just then a messenger from the Devashahi arrived with the terms for peace- 'Devaputra Shahi is ready to spare Ramagupta's life and throne on the condition that he would have to deliver his head queen Dhruvadevi to my harem.' In retrospect it is hard for me to imagine how a son born of Samudragupta and Dattadevi could turn out to be such coward. That pathetic excuse of a man tried to persuade Dhruvasvamini to agree to this condition for peace. It would be better if you hear the rest of the story from Dhruvaswamini herself."

Dhruvaswamini narrated the rest of the story- "I was filled with rage and astonishment to hear what he was asking of me- "Devi! Devaputrashahi is a terrible enemy, he wants to put an end to the Gupta dynasty. I would not have cared much if this sated him, but in the wake of his invasion he will unleash a reign of terror upon our subjects. Villages would be burnt. Shakas are known to be very cruel, they would not spare even the women and children. With the best interests of my subjects in my mind, I have decided that I must let you go."

"The coward thought he was Raghukul Ram. Shame on him!!"

"I was burning with rage. I am a daughter of the brave Malavas and the head queen of the Gupta dynasty. I denounced him for being the coward that he was. Tell me brother Jai! Could a man sink any lower? To cover his cowardice he was giving the example of Ram; the same Ram who burnt entire Lanka to take back his wife from her captors. I told myself that I would not be the wife of this spineless coward and a daughter of the brave Malavas would never let herself be prostituted. I informed Chandra of what was happening as I was certain that he would not let this infamy be committed. Ramagupta knew that Chandra is brave and he was himself wary of him but that coward could not be expected to act decisively to protect even his own self interest. Chandra wiped my tears and swore- "I would die before letting anyone outrage the honour of Guptas." You know Chandra, he might have a hundred vices but cowardice is certainly not one of them."

The rest of the story was narrated by Chandra himself- "I had understood that a king who preferred his enemy's beautiful wife to his crown must be a man given to debauchery. There wasn't much hope of defeating the Shakas in an open battle. Though I had no doubts about the bravery of our soldiers, I did not have any faith left upon the cowardly commanders appointed by Ramagupta. So I decided that I would have to use guile to defeat him. My plan was dangerous but I was determined that either I would save the honour of the Guptas or die trying. Virasena became my confidant. He had faith in my plan and like me he was ready to die for the honour of the empire. We selected five hundred fearless men. They were told- "We are going to enter the enemy's house. They are expecting us and therefore, they would not be caught unawares. Our chances are slim but we cannot stand and watch while our enemies ravage the honour of our empire. We are going to sacrifice our lives for our motherland; only those of you who treat the fear of death with utter disdain may join us." They all agreed to come without a moment's hesitation. I wore Dhruvadevi's clothes and dressed my soldiers in women's attire. We shaved off our

beards and moustaches and tied our long hair like women's buns. On the way to the enemy's court we would shave twice a day and apply rouge upon our faces to look more feminine."

"I have seen your plays Chandra! I do not have an iota of doubt that you must have managed this feat of transforming your soldiers into the entourage of a royal lady with a lot of dexterity."

"But I hadn't imagined in my wildest dreams that the skills of an artist that I had honed as a child would someday come in of use as a weapon of war. I presented my plan to Ramagupta and said- "Brother! Let us try once. Even if we fail it would be worthwhile for us to die fighting for the honour of our empire. Ramagupta was very happy to hear our plan. He embraced me and thanked me profusely for the risk I was taking to save his throne. I knew instantly that he was hoping that two of his staunchest enemies would be eliminated at one blow. He sent a humble message to the Shakaraj that the Gupta queen would be sent to him along with her entourage provided that he promised to honour the terms he had offered. So 'Dhruvaswamini' left for the enemy's capital accompanied with her five hundred attendants. Shakaraj had heard the tales of Dhruvaswamini's beauty and he was getting eager to meet her. We reached his camp across the Yamuna. Shakaraja came out to greet me in person; he could not resist the temptation of seeing me once and removed the drawn curtain of my palanquin. He stood there for a moment, staring at the beauty that had arrived at his doorstep. Shakaraj looked at my beautiful big eyes, a coy smile playing on my lips and was mesmerized instantly. He put his hand on my shoulder and said 'My precious'. I gave him a coquettish smile and gently removed his hand."

"I know you Chandra! You are a natural, I am sure your acting must have convinced him."

"I too was amazed at my initial success. Then the night came; the palace was lit up with hundreds of lamps to mark the occasion. But we weren't at all in a celebratory mood, expecting as we were the worst outcome. Devaputra came to his new wife. Red wine was served in golden goblets and Chettis began their dancing-singing. We were seated side by side. With a lot of apparent affection I was serving wine to him. He would insist that I should drink too but somehow I managed to avoid getting drunk."

"That ill-starred king! He had no clue that the master of guile Kautilya himself had incarnated to annihilate him."

"No matter how great the risk, a man who has learnt to keep his cool always manages to come out unscathed. Shakaraja gradually got drunk,

barely able to keep his eyes open anymore. His hands fumbled over my clothes, at times brushing against my artificial breasts or resting upon my thighs. I ordered the attendants to leave. Chettis too, sensing that we were getting intimate, left the room. But the room was still alight. He was getting impatient. I said- "I feel shy in the light, so stumbling-drunk I went out of the room and asked the guard standing outside to douse the lamps. I guess you know by now who that guard standing outside might have been?"

"I am sure that not just that post but the entire palace must have been infiltrated by your men by then."

"I had ample time to locate where the Shaka's heart was. He was already dead drunk by then. Pretending that I was about to embrace him, with my right hand I plunged my dagger into his heart and put my left hand over his mouth. He could not even let out a scream. Even if he had time to do something, we were ready—around fifty of my men were hovering around his room. We immediately left the palace through different gates and spent the rest of the night running up to a pre-decided location. Our army was on alert and horses had already been placed at the point of our rendezvous. As soon as we reached one of our border posts, I narrated the entire story to our soldiers. Celebrations began immediately and people began to chant the slogans of 'long live our glorious prince Chandragupta!.' I asked the commanders to attack the Shakas immediately; before they had a chance to regroup. And then I proceeded to Ramagupta's camp accompanied by Virasena and a few of my trusted comrades. He had already heard the news of my success and arrival to his camp, but you know how stingy the Providence was in endowing Ramagupta with common sense. Dhruvaswamini was present there. Ramagupta was surrounded with the imperial guard but my success had increased my confidence manifolds. He came forward to embrace me. The dagger I had plunged into the heart of the Shaka was still hanging from my waist. Without a moment's hesitation I pierced it through the coward's heart. He let out a scream and fell on the ground dying. Dhruvaswamini ran up to me immediately and hugged me. I wiped her tears, but these were tears of joy. The imperial guard stood transfixed, apparently too stunned to react. I addressed them and roared- 'Do you grieve for this coward?' Just then I heard Dhruvaswamini voice- "Victory to the emperor." Chettis too joined after her and said- "Victory to the emperor Chandragupta." Chandragupta was now the emperor of the Gupta empire."

"And his prize included the hand of Dhruvaswamini."

I noticed that he had suddenly become upset. I said- "Probably there was no other way Chandra."

"You are right. Among the royal clans assassinating brothers is not a new thing. In fact on several occasions, princes are known to have killed their own fathers for the throne. But I certainly did not have any such plans to begin with. Though I had no doubts that sooner or later he would have to be imprisoned; a coward and fool like him did not deserve the crown but I never thought that Ramagupta was a big enough threat to require assassination. I guess his decision to trade away his own wife made me so angry that I could not spare his life. He had done the unthinkable—to send the daughter-in-law of Samudragupta, the conqueror of vast lands between the two horizons, the master of the entire land between the two great seas—to the harem of barbaric Shakas. He had become a puppet in the hands of his scheming ministers. I had to strike a decisive blow at the root of this deep rot within our empire."

XXX

It was a winter night, Dhruvadevi, Chandragupta and I were sitting on a boat, gradually rowing upstream. On our either sides was floating along a huge fleet consisting of the imperial guard and the royal entourage. This is the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna. It is possible for an onlooker to distinguish between the two streams; Yamuna is deep blue whereas Ganga is clear transparent. In between the two one could see a shining white strip of sand over which yogis had built their thatched huts. I was born at Agrodka and there is no such big river there. At the age of one I saw the deep calm stream of Ganga for the first time. As I grew up, I would spend hours swimming in it. I had the same relationship to Ganga as a child has towards his mother. Having wandered so far from it for almost a decade, now I felt that my affection for the river had redoubled. I was looking at its flow intently. Chandra noticed me looking at the stream and asked- "Why Jai! You are staring at the river as though you are seeing it for the first time."

"Everytime I see Ganga it is new to me. You and I have seen its origin too. There its flow is feeble, but it makes up for it through its roaring murmur."

"Ah! The Himalayas! Those were the days; we rode the yaks, scaled snow clad mountains. Who could ever forget the majesty of tall deodars and the sweet scent they disperse in the air around them."

"Watching the Ganga at its origin is so satisfying; and this is the confluence. Who would not feel mesmerized? Chandra! It's a good thing that you chose to make Pratishthana your second capital. You made sure that you stay close to Ganga."

"My ministers advised that I should build my second capital on the land between Ganga and Yamuna."

"That is not a bad advice, both the streams would have been visible from the new city. And come to think of it, the new city could have been named after you."

"Yes, it could have been named Vikrampuri. Did I tell you? I have assumed the title of Vikramaditya (the sun of bravery)."

"Who could deny that you are brave?"

"But I am not in favour of building a new city between two rivers."

"Why so?"

"I do not like to see two competing streams. I fact I desire that there should be only one stream that subsumes all the rest. Parallel streams are an ugly sight to me; an eyesore."

"And you prefer Pratishthan because you see just one stream here, subsuming the other."

"I guess if my father, emperor Samudra Gupta was to found a city, he would have preferred the land between the two rivers. He was so unlike me, I prefer a unified stream and he would celebrate the idea of parallel co-existent streams."

"But it is not easy to unify all streams into one Chandra."

"I never said it is easy but there is no other way. I do not agree with father's idea of starting a campaign of conquest and then returning the conquered lands to their rulers with the mere promise of subservience. Such conquests cannot be expected to endure for too long. What I want more than anything else is to establish a strong and unified empire that may last for a while."

"I hope when you say 'for a while', you do not mean forever."

"It would be so arrogant as to say 'forever', but one can certainly hope that it lasts for a long time. I am yet to come across a dynasty that produced able kings for more than five generations. In fact, in most cases they do not last more than a generation. My father, emperor Samudra Gupta was the one who took the Gupta empire to the heights of glory. Through his incessant efforts and conquests he became a Chakravartin (all conquering emperor). Do you know what he had to say about the issue in his old age?"

"The task of the founder of a dynasty is always very arduous. He comes from an unknown family, he has no history, no past glory behind him, neither does he have inherited wealth or army to bank upon; he must build everything from scratch. But his successors get all of this without exerting any sort of effort, and still surprisingly, I agree with you here, no dynasty has ever managed to retain its grandeur for more than five generations."

"What is so surprising about this? Because they get everything so easily, they forget how much effort goes into maintaining the strength and grandeur of an empire and surrender themselves to cheap pleasures of the palace. But Jai! I thought you disliked Kautilya, how is it that you are talking in his language?"

"I never said that he had no insight. Afterall it was a result of his farsightedness that our motherland could remain free from the ravages of Yavana invaders for over two centuries."

"And you are right. My dream is to build a system strong enough to endure occasional weak kings given to debauchery. I desire to leave behind an empire so strong that no enemy would ever dare to cast a covetous glance upon our motherland. And I am not doing this solely for the Guptas, I would not mind even if the empire is ruled by some other dynasty in future, provided it remains firm and strong enough to defend Bharat."

I began to think—Chandra Gupta's vision is not wrong but can humans become lifeless bricks in a wall? Now it is definitely true that if exactly similar bricks are cemented together, they form an intimidating and strong wall. But humans loathe to be treated like lifeless objects in the hands of a clever mason; they are sentient beings. If there is a need to come together to form a wall, they prefer it that the initiative should come from among themselves. Our Yaudheya republic did not require a mason like Chandra Gupta to chisel and beat us into forming a wall. Agrodka, Prithudka, Khandila, Rohitki etc...they did not require any mason to cement them. And yet, they did come together to form a wall so strong that for generations no aggressor could breach it. It is not Chandra Gupta's fault, having been born in an absolutist monarchy, he cannot think of any other way to bring humans together to form political associations. His ideals are despotic emperors like himself who cannot think of other humans as anything more than pliant tools meant to fulfil their whimsical desires. His god too is a despot who supposedly treats humans like raw clay pots that may be given any shape that happens to catch his fancy.

Chandra Gupta's thoughts were filling my mind with a deep sense of foreboding and I was finding it difficult to hang on to his words. He continued- "I have far more resources at my disposal than what my father Bhattaraka could muster when he started his wars of conquest. Through his relentless efforts I have inherited the dreaded army and prestige of the glorious Gupta empire. I am capable of launching a war of conquests of my own and possibly I would be more successful than Bhattaraka himself. But I do not want to start a campaign for the sake of it; we must plan in

advance and prepare carefully. My desire is that our boundaries should stretch as far as the western sea."

His demeanor had hardened while saying this and I knew that this wasn't mere boastful talk; he had a firm resolve in his mind. I asked- "Upto the western sea?"

"Yes, upto the western sea. We control the eastern sea coast (Bay of Bengal)- the entire trade with the eastern islands and China is in our hands; likewise if we can control the western seaboard, the entire trade with Arabian ports, Persians and Greeks would pass into our hands. Real wealth lies in commerce; if we can assume full control over it, so much treasure would flow into our coffers that no king would ever be able to match us in the battlefield."

"So you mean that you intend to wipe out the kingdoms of Vakatakas and Kshatrapas?"

"Yes, I intend to annihilate the Kshatrapas. Chandra Gupta's intention is to wipe this name off from the annals of history."

"But Kshatrapas are a formidable enemy."

"I know that Mahakshatrapa is by far a stronger adversary than Satyasena and Rudrasena, and when he learns that unlike his father Chandra Gupta cannot be satisfied with mere promises of subservience he would leave no stone unturned to defend his empire. But Chandra Gupta has prepared for the coming war meticulously. Our old commanders from the time of father Bhattaraka know now that they may expect honour from Chandra Gupta but expecting from him any sort of right in policy making would be a folly."

"Cannot expect any sort of rights means?"

"Meaning that I have taken away the right to command my glorious imperial army from their weak and inept hands."

"But they have years of experience behind them."

"I never said that I am not ready to learn from their experience. But I do not trust their ability to lead my army into battles bravely. I might consult them, but the final seal of approval would be mine. Their skills and experience are fifty years old. Now we are experimenting with new tactics."

"So you wish to divest the old from positions of responsibility?"

"Yes. I do not want to give positions of responsibility to the old men and old princely houses. The old are generally incapable of acting decisively, they are like a blight that destroys fresh crops. And the old princely families are even worse; they are so eager to protect their old

honour that it is impossible for them to entertain even minimal risk entailed by the implementation of a new idea. I wish to keep my army and administration free of these two vices as far a possible. You are probably still unaware of the steps Chandra Gupta has taken to reorganize the imperial administrative structure. Our Bhuktis (provinces) and Vishayas (districts) are headed by a new kind of cadre called the Upariks (Viceroys) and Kumaramatayas (high imperial deputies)."

"So the Upariks are no longer referred to as Maharaja (king)?"

"They hold their titles at my sufferance. None of the imperial officials has any sort of inherent right upon his office. And there is one more thing that I have done—strict exclusion of brahmins from all military posts. I have observed, very rarely do brahmins make capable soldiers. They have learning, which the imperial administration can make use of, but they make awful warriors. I find them fit only in the role of pen pushers for the empire."

"But wasn't Pushyamitra a great general?"

"Pushyamitra Shunga was a brahmin and the commander-in-chief of the Mauryan empire. He betrayed his masters and founded his own empire."

"But Chandra! Haven't you heard of Pushyamitra Shunga?"

"Yes I have. True, he was a brahmin and the commander-in-chief of the Mauryas, but what did he do? He betrayed his master and established his own empire, appointing him as the commander-in-chief was a mistake. We need statesmen like Chanakya but giving military posts to brahmins would be a mistake."

"So, you think that only kshatriyas are fit for military service?"

"Yes, brave men from families with long tradition of military service but bereft of the crown. Crown and bravery seldom go together."

"So, you detest the crown?"

"I know you are happy about this. After all you are a Yaudheya."

"But Chandra! You too have royal blood flowing in your veins."

"Of course I am proud of it. And I am hopeful that my Dhruvaswamini's son would proudly carry forward the legacy of our glorious family." Chandra looked at Dhruvaswamini and smiled benignly. Dhruvaswamini held his hand in her hands and said affectionately- "Our lord banks upon the lineage of the republican bloodline."

"Because it is free of the corrupting influence of the crown. My father was the son of a daughter of the Licchavi republic, I am a son of the

Yaudheya republic and I am hopeful that our son too would be born with the bravery characteristic of republican men." Chandra caressed Dhruvaswamini's face.

From what I remembered of his early youth, I hadn't imagined this sort of loyalty towards one woman from Chandra. But now I feel that no temptation is dearer to him than his ambition. Of course he hadn't taken a vow of loyalty or celibacy but he did not see a point in making the royal palace the permanent abode of hundreds of women like his father."

And Dhruvadevi was bearing the mantle of the empress of the empire as well as her distinguished predecessors—my elder sister Dattadevi and Chandra's grandmother Kumaradevi. She was a strong willed women with firm opinions, opinions which Chandra always took seriously; needless to say that they were deeply in love with each other. That he addressed her as 'Swamini' (mistress) or 'Dhruvaswamini' (mistress Dhruva) instead of Dhuvadevi reflected the depth of his sentiments. And she had such strength of character and influential personality that anyone else except me would have easily bowed to her will and served the Guptas till the end of his life. True, I was the emperor's uncle but such relatives abound in every imperial family and scarcely any need is paid to their sentiments or well-being. It was absolutely unnecessary for her to pay such close attention to me. Though I do not think that all the emotions she displayed were genuine or heartfelt she never betrayed any sign of their being artificial. And she had a great sense of humour too.

Despite the presence of numerous Chettis, Dhruvadevi insisted on serving me food herself. She took every care that I was well entertained and properly fed. I do not think that all her sentiments were heartfelt but even if her affection for me wasn't entirely true she was skillful enough to make it look genuine. And she had a good sense of humour too which added to her charm. One day she was saying-

"Dear Jai ! Both of you were brought up by Ajjuka herself with a lot of love and affection. Now Ajjuka is no longer with us, but it is my heartfelt desire that the two of you should be together again." Her eyes had become moist as she said this.

I laughed and said "Don't you see my robe? I could not possibly live in this palace and remain a monk at the same time."

"Robes of monkhood aren't meant to be worn forever. I know of several princes who became monks in their youth and then shed it later to lead the life of a householder. Ever since your return I have become possessed with the idea of bringing you back to the palace."

"And pray tell my queen what role do you visualize for this humble servant in your grand palace."

"That you should become husband to my little sister."

"So your intention is to demote me from the honourable position of being the emperor's uncle to being his wife's brother-in-law."

"I may call you 'uncle' Jai if you so desire, but to me you will always remain 'dear Jai', my husband's lovely childhood companion."

"I am certain that lord Almighty was particularly liberal in endowing charm while creating you my queen. Dhruva Bhattarika, during all these years of my long travels I did not have occasion to meet another woman who could bewitch a man with her words like you do."

"Dear Jai, I can assure you that my sibling is no novice in this art either."

"In that case she deserves nothing less than another Chandra Gupta."

"So, you have sworn not to take me seriously. Trust me Jai, since the day I met you, I have decided that there could not be a better match for my little sister. How I wish I could see the two of you happily married."

"Dhruva Bhattarika, usually I respect your judgement, but I am afraid that in this instance you are wrong. Do you think that a beauty bubbling with youth deserves to be tied down with a lifeless robe wearing monk like me?"

"Get rid of the robe and everything would be bright and shiny again. I do not understand brother Jai! Why are you letting this robe make your life dull? If not to me, then pay heed to the desires of your Creator who endowed you with such wonderful gifts of beauty, youth and health. I have heard tales about how you lived at the palace, you loved to torture palace beauties craving for even so much as an approving glance from you."

"Am I guilty of deliberately humiliating or insulting someone?"

"I do not think that you are capable of insulting anyone, particularly women. But it is also true that despite showing outward respect, you keep yourself aloof from them. This hurts many of them but I appreciate this quality in you. I am convinced that the day you fall in love with a woman, you will devote yourself wholeheartedly to her."

"And you want me to devote myself wholeheartedly to your sister? But pray tell Bhattarika! Could a monk devote himself to a woman?"

"I would see how this ochre robe resists the charms of her blue eyes. My sister would be here at Pratishthana in a few days. At least see her once before you make up your mind."

"I need not see her to know that she must be a beauty. One specimen is enough to convince me that every artwork created by the lapidarist would make for an irresistible possession."

Dhurvadevi's charm was proving to be irresistible. Gradually but surely she was tying me down with webs of affection and I no longer felt as certain of what I wanted. Hatred is easy to counter but it is by far more difficult to wade through the webs of attachment cast by those whom we love. I was beginning to feel worried about my shaking resolve. Chandra's approach was different. One day he said to me- "Jai! I feel so lucky that fate has blessed me such that most of the beautiful dreams I had seen as a child have come true. But one part of it still remains unfulfilled; I have faith in my abilities but one man, no matter how accomplished, cannot do everything on his own. Jai! I need you by my side; if you become the Mahabaladhrikrita (commander-in-chief) of the imperial army, we would become unstoppable." I was so relieved of my monk's attire, which was an excuse in itself. But for it, it would have been impossible to come up with a convincing justification for refusing this honour.

First War with Vikramaditya

An entire age seemed to have passed since my last visit to Agrodka. I was a child then, now I was a middle aged man. Madhav had come along; as soon as we crossed the Yamuna and stepped onto the Yaudheya land, both of us got rid of our Buddhist robes and assumed the attire of Yaudheya warriors. Chandra Gupta had tried to lure me through love, respect and the temptation of a high office. He was no stranger to the Yaudheya's bravery; he had no doubts that when the time comes to choose between freedom and death, they would unhesitatingly embraced the latter. Though in his conversations with me Chandra had never spelt out his intention to invade the Yaudheya land, I understood fully well by now that this was a crucial part of his larger scheme. He had expressed his intent to conquer the Kshtrapas, the Vakatakas and Kushana Devaputras but said nothing about the Yaudheya land which lied in between the Kushana and Kshtrapa empires. One would have to be extremely naive to think that Yaudheya land wasn't a part of his grand imperial designs. While Samudra Gupta had deep love and reverence for Yaudheyas, his son expected nothing but humble submission from them. Samudra Gupta was a warrior, ferocious against a recalcitrant enemy but generous to his friends,whereas Chandra Gupta was a statesman. He scoffed at what he considered to be weak sentimentality and held detached objective political calculations supreme. Samudra Gupta paid tribute to his mother's clan by issuing gold coins

carrying the engraving- 'Lichchiviyah' (of the Lichchivihs). But Yaudheyas could expect no such generosity from Chandra Gupta.

At Agrodka, my father's friends had preserved the house he had lived in and eagerly awaited my arrival. They hoped that the son of this humble and devoted servant of the republic would turn out to be as dedicated and brave as his father. Several times they had tried to find out about my whereabouts without any success and were extremely happy when I returned after so many years. I was no less happy to be finally back amongst my kin but it worried me to realize that they had no clue about the imminent threat that loomed large over the republic. Most of them seemed to think that Chandra Gupta would turn out to be as big hearted an emperor as his father. I set about my work immediately- I met several elders and tried to make them aware of the imminence of war with Chandra Gupta but soon realized that they were still residing in some past age, wary of being shaken out of it into a new reality. So I decided to turn my attention to the youth. 'Our republic is in the danger of being wiped out. Expect no mercy from a tyrant like Chandra Gupta, prepare for the coming war. Yaudheya republic would be his first target'.

My new friend Revtak asked- "Why should he deal with our republic first? Guptas have a longer history of bitter enmity with the Kshtrapas, Vakatakas the Devaputras who haven't yet been fully dealt with."

"Because among all his enemies, he considers us the weakest."

"What! Is he unaware of the might of our swords and the ferocity of our dauntless men?"

"He is not unaware of it, and yet he has chosen us as his first target. Chandra Gupta is not foolish enough to start a war on all four fronts all at once, his strategy is to deal with his enemies one by one."

"So one enemy at a time. He is a statesman."

"And I have reasons to believe that he will want to deal with us first."

"Why does he think us to be the weakest?"

"Why should he think otherwise? Are we ready for war? Try talking to the elders, they think that Chandra Gupta's coming war is a figment of my imagination. Friends, if you were to take a tour of Agrodka, Prithudka, Rohitki or any other city, you would realize that we are utterly ill prepared for any war. In the past thirty years we have done nothing to strengthen the quality of our soldiers and battle tactics."

"And yet it is true that most Yaudheya men would happily shed their lives to protect their republic. I agree with you that it is futile to expect much from the elders. They have spent the greater part of the past thirty

years fattening themselves through rich trade with the Guptas. Can one expect such people to feel excited about the prospect of war with them? No wonder that they are in denial. Their overflowing coffers have made them used to a decadent life of comfort, words like freedom, bravery and honour do not appeal to them now and their children identify more with the easygoing slavish life of Magadhan shopkeepers than Yaudheyas' life of freedom and hardship."

I had already won over Revatak to my point of view, he helped me in finding more recruits to our pursuit. Yaudheya youth has no reason to doubt what I was saying, everyone knew that I knew Chandra Gupta more closely than anyone else. For those who cared to pay attention, signs of the coming war were everywhere. Horses coming in from Tushar, Kamboj and Sindh were being bought up even before crossing the Yamuna bank. War horses had never been so expensive and the horse merchants had never made such huge profits in anybody's living memory. I handpicked twenty five young men from different cities to pose as horse merchants and visit Patliputra. Though I was convinced that all their horses would be bought off the moment they entered the Gupta borders, I had asked them not to sell off their horses till they had reached the capital. What they saw on their way to Patliputra convinced them that Vikramaditya Chandra Gupta was indeed preparing for a prolonged war of conquest.

We were aware that Magadhan spies were active in the Yaudheya land as well. They ranged through our lands in the guise of beggars, merchants, fortune tellers, wandering yogis etc. We decided that we needed to take every possible measure to keep our preparation for defence secret. So we started off by setting up young men's clubs for horse riding, hunting and sword fighting. A number of gymnasiums were set up where young men were encouraged to learn the use of weapons. As a decoy we pretended that these newly set up clubs were a place for convivial gatherings and drinking parties. Every evening a group of men and women gathered at these gymnasiums and held drunken revelries. To ensure that these clubs did not invite the curiosity of spies we decided that none of these clubs should have more than twenty members and that they should be spread out evenly all over the Yaudheya land. To an outsider these might have seemed like spontaneously set up local clubs but in reality all of them functioned under a centralized command structure supervised from Agrodka. Our convivial parties in the evenings were in fact occasions for heated discussions about our political and organizational tasks. But we brought huge quantities of red wine, which was in fact mostly water mixed with edible red colours. To the spies and internal enemies we wanted to give the impression that huge quantities of wine were being consumed

at these gatherings. Our plans were kept secret from the elders due to their hostile attitude towards any mention of the coming war with Chandra Gupta. Initially these gatherings were ignored by them as harmless indulgences of deviant youth, but as the membership of our clubs increased they began to feel worried now. One day I was accosted by the Puruskrita (chosen leader) of the republic Bappa Yaudheya- "Son Jai, we have a lot of expectations from you. We know that you are very popular among young men. Don't you feel pained at seeing so many of them whiling away their time in mindless revelries? Can't you see that our age old tradition of hardship and honest labour is gradually getting lost?"

"I agree with you Arya. But can you say with confidence that in the last thirty years you have led your lives in accordance with the highest ideals of the Yaudheya people of the fore?"

"Nobody is perfect Jai. We might have become somewhat lax but these young men seem to have lost all sense of responsibility."

"I beg your pardon Arya but in my humble opinion they are merely emulating the lifestyle you have cherished in the past thirty years. Have you not been trying to emulate the viceroy at Mathura? Building palatial houses and competing with each other in buying pretty slave girls? Yes, it is true that till now most of us pretended not to notice and dismissed these as occasional aberrations but if the young men have now taken to emulating you without feeling guilty about it then you can hardly blame them. You are as much responsible for sapping the vitality of our republic as them."

"You use very harsh words son. Weren't you saying that Chandra Gupta is planning an invasion of our lands. If that day indeed comes then can we trust these irresponsible and decadent men to defend the freedom and honour of our people?"

"Defence of our people? Do you really think that we care about it anymore? For small profits Yaudheya merchants are selling thousands of war horses imported from Tushar and Kamboj to Chandra Gupta every year. You can either care about your people or sell war horses to Guptas, both cannot be done together. In my opinion choosing your trade would be wiser. Which sane man would want to trade the heavenly pleasures that Magadha can offer for the living hell that Yaudheya land is—would you trade you precious silk for our coarse linen, Magadhan delicacies for our bland fare, palaces for our ordinary houses? I think Arya, such distinguished men as yourself, have already made your choice and you have chosen as wisely as a clever Magadhan merchant would. Thanks to the benefices of the Magadhans, you need not remain a Maharaja in the name only now."

"Son! I know you are angry and rightly so. We should have paid heed to your advice but why are you taking out your anger on our people and the republic when we are the ones who are to blame. If we bring disrepute to our people then as a son of our republic your duty is to bring us back to our senses, isn't?" By now he had tears in eyes.

I bowed to touch his feet. By now overcome with emotions I said- "Father, forgive me for using such harsh words. Be rest assured that we will defend our people against tyrants till the last man. Please do come with me tonight to see for yourself how we are preparing to defeat Chandra Gupta."

So it was decided that he would come along to one of the clubs in the evening to observe what went on during the 'drunken revelries. I asked him to choose anyone among the hundreds of clubs at Agrodka. He chose the one which had acquired a particularly bad reputation among the elders. It was a full moon night. Around a hundred young men and women had gathered at one of the bigger houses. Though it was still not very late, the gathering already seemed drunk. As soon as we entered the house all of them laughed loud. And then we heard Revtak's drunken-stammering voice- "See who's here! The grand old daddy" A collective laughter. Then a woman's voice- "Hand over a glass to the grand old papa." Another bout of uncontrollable laughter. "Grand old daddy cannot handle drinks anymore." "The old loony probably wants to drink outside in the moonglow." By now people were rolling on the floor, punching their fists on the ground, apparently unable to control their laughter. Jibes were taken at me as well- "Jai, you cheap turncoat! You switched sides."

Puruskrita now held my hand and said- "Jai, they are not in their senses. Let's leave before they insult us more." I said, of course we will leave but let's taste some of this red wine before we go. He stared at me in amazement as I served him some of our red wine in a glass. The Puruskrita took one sip and said- "But there is no wine in this, it tastes like red sorbet!" Another round of loud laughter, but this time it did not sound drunk. "So you were pulling my leg!" I replied- "We do not really drink at these gatherings Arya! In fact we discuss politics and strategy here. This red sorbet is served to give spies and internal enemies the impression that these are normal convivial gatherings."

Puruskrita was getting sentimental once again- "I am relieved that our young men and women are preparing for the coming war so meticulously and cleverly and at the same time I am ashamed that we, elders have been a hindrance to your endeavours till now. But looking at you I feel rest assured that the future of our people and the republic are in safe hands. Long live the Yaudheya people! Long live the republic!"

All repeated in unison- "Long live the Yaudheya people! Long live the republic!"

Puruskrita Bappa turned towards me. His eyes had moistened again.

We had the full backing of Puruskrita Bappa now. I gave him an overview of how far our preparations had proceeded. How many youths had joined our militia, the extent of their training and the weaponry we had gathered till date. He was surprised to learn how many of our youth had donated their ancestral treasures accumulated painstakingly by their fathers in the course of the past thirty years of rich commerce with the Magadhans. Not just the men but women too were learning swordfighting and the use of bows and arrows. But I also warned him that our preparedness had not reached the level that we could let Chandra Gupta get a whiff of what we were up to. I said to him- "Arya ! It is impossible that some potential traitors are present among Yaudheyas themselves so divulge this secret only to the ones who are absolutely trustworthy."

"Bappa asked me to remain rest assured. One year passed. One day the supreme council of Yaudheyas met at Agrodka, members from all our cities and villages arrived. After the death of my father, I had inherited a membership of the council. After attending to the usual matters, Puruskrita Bappa got up to speak- "My revered council members, please listen to my plea. It is our long tradition that the Puruskrita of the republic is bestowed with the title of Maharaja. Today I humbly bow before this distinguished council and propose that henceforth, the title of Maharaja be abolished. Maharaja is an ominous word. Maharajas rule the lands to our east and west. We all know what this word means- Maharaja is supposed to be the shepherd of thousands of helpless sheep. Lest anyone of us be possessed by the temptation of being the shepherd of our people, I propose that this title be abolished."

No vice rich merchant Jaluka said in a fake sweet tone- "Dear councillors, it appears that our revered Puruskrita thinks this title to be a personal honour. In my opinion, and I think all of you would agree with me this title is granted as per our centuries old tradition. The republic feel proud that its ablest man bears this title every year. This is not a personal honour assumed by an individual."

Around ten-twelve member stood up to lend approval to Jaluka's argument. I wasn't at all surprised to observe that almost all of them were the newly become rich merchants. I had been silent till now. I sought Puruskrita's permission and stood up to speak- "Revered councillors. I beg your pardon for deigning to contradict your opinion despite my youth and lack of experience in comparison to yours. I am in full agreement with

Puruskrita Bappa's proposal. This word 'Maharaja' might seem innocuous to us but its effect is nothing less than that of a deadly poison for our republic. To our east, west and south, kings and emperors assume this title and drive men to commit the most heinous of crimes known to humanity. It would also be wrong to say that we have had this title since eternity. The history of republican form of polity is older than that of monarchy. There was a time when all of humanity was ruled by republics. Crores of dinars weren't spent on the luxuries and sprawling harems of a handful of kings; when millions of men did not have to sacrifice themselves to fulfil the egoistic desires for conquests of a few kings. It is less than two thousand years since the Puruskrita of Kurus and Panchalas, who lived across the Yamuna, assumed the title of Maharaja for the first time in the history of our land and then gradually divested these assemblies of all effective power. The same pattern was later repeated in other republics. Where is the Kosala republic today, Kasi republic, Chedi republic, Vatsa republic? Almost all the republics of Bharat gradually fell prey of insatiable men who styled themselves as Maharajas. Now none of them accept that their ancestors got their crowns by betraying their republics. They all claim that the Almighty has himself appointed them for the welfare of their subjects." Even while I was speaking, a young councillor Kumar got up and began to say- "Welfare! Welfare! Do these kings build their grand palaces and fill up their coffers for the welfare of their people? What hell would have broken loose upon these poor people if they did not have these tyrants for kings? We do not have a king; have we become immoral? Do we cheat each other, rape our neighbours' wives, steal from our friends? Yaudheyas do not have a king and yet we are by far happier than kings' subject. One merely needs to cross the Yamuna to see for oneself what goes on in the name of kings' welfare. I think the title of Maharaja for our Puruskrita is of a recent origin. I think our forefathers had to adopt this under duress from either Greek or Shaka invaders. Kings are always insecure of republics and try to destroy the ones they come across. It is possible that we started giving this title to our Puruskrita to please our invaders. But it was a mistake and a dangerous compromise. It is a tribute to our firm republican tradition as well as our good fortune that our Maharajas did not turn into real kings. I think it is more honourable for the leader of our republic to be called 'Arya, Ganapati or Yaudheya Senapati than being styled as Maharaja after the fashion of the decadent monarchies that surround us from all sides. I too request the revered council to consider abolishing this title."

After this a number of other councillors got up and supported the motion moved by Puruskrita Bappa. Then Puruskrita asked the opponents- "Would you like to put the motion to vote?" The newly rich gauging the

charged up mood of the council and seeing themselves hopelessly outnumbered decided to take back their opposition. The title of maharaja was thus abolished.

Our year long efforts had begun to pay off. People seemed to have acquired a sense of purpose once again. Except for the new rich like Jaluka and a few elders everybody else seemed to have a positive opinion about our endeavours. Jaluka and his friends were often heard saying- "This man Jai is a warmonger. He will bring war upon us and our crops and homes would burn once more under the wrath of the Gupta armies." But we were under no illusions about the source of Jaluka's worries. Young men would say- "He spreads panic not because he is worried about his people. Jaluka and his companions' real apprehension is that the invasion might disrupt their trade with Magadha. Big palaces, filled coffers and profitable trade is all they care about and so if they can have their way, they would beg to Chandra Gupta for peace on any terms he might dictate."

As per the Yaudhēya tradition, membership of the council was granted to the eldest male member of each family. As a result most of the councillors were elderly people. But now, due to our new initiative, a lot of decisions were being made by the youth clubs we had been organizing. Due to our efforts, there was hardly any young man or woman who was not associated with one of our clubs in one way or the another. We organised the men we had been training into a militia- twenty members constituted a mandali, five mandalis a shatika and ten shatikas a sahastrika. Within a span of an year and a half, we had managed to raise hundreds of armies organised in this manner. The militia elected me as its commander. Later this decision was ratified by Puruskrita Bappa with the approval of the assembly.

Somewhile after this we held a meeting for shatika commanders at Bhadra. They submitted reports about the war preparedness of their respective divisions. From the reports and their enthusiasm I gathered that they were shouldering their responsibilities well. I said-

"Dear friends, it is really heartening to see our youth come forward and assume the honorous duty of defending our cherished way of life against imperialist agressors. Your enthusiasm and sense of responsibility inspires the hope among our people that the future of our republic is bright. You are all aware how diligently our friend Madhava has been serving the cause of defence against imperialist aggressors. Recently he had gone as our messenger to his own republic (Malavas) with our appeal to them to join our broad anti-imperialist front. Now he will brief you about their response. Madhava got up to speak- "Friends, I am very sorry to inform

you that despite my hopes to the contrary, Malavas have refused to join our anti-imperialist coalition. We are well aware how enthusiastically the Arjunayan republic had responded when Jai visited them with the same appeal. Today the Malavas' assembly is completely dominated by the rich among them. They take pride in the fact that emperor Chandra Gupta is married to a Malava princess. Mahakshtrapa Rudra Simha sends them peace overtures and they feel that Malavas have nothing to fear anymore. The leaders say- "Our enemies are thirsty for each others' blood. So long as Chandra Gupta and Rudra Simha keeping fighting each other Malavas need not fear an invasion from either side." I tried to reason with them, trying to explain to them that this balance of power cannot sustain itself forever, the moment either one of the two is able to conquer the other, it would be Malavas' turn to face invasion. The Puruskrita Maharaj of Malava republic is also the commander-in-chief of the army. His authority is unchallenged and I suspect that he harbours a secret ambition of becoming a real king with the help of his son-in-law Chandra Gupta. The most unfortunate aspect of this dismal situation is the fact that Malava elders and even the youth are at the moment unable to gauge the grave threat that looms large over their republic. I think Yaudheyas have acted very wisely in abolishing the title of Maharaja here. I had gone with the hope that Malavas too would join the coalition of Yaudheyas, Arjunayans and Kunindas in resisting the inevitable Gupta onslaught. But unfortunately Malavas seem to believe at the moment that their interest lies in co-operating with the Guptas. All one can say, albeit with a heavy heart, that in the end Malavas would have none but themselves to blame if their ancient republic meets its demise in the near future."

Madhava talked for some while more about his observations about the current diplomatic situation and then Revatak took over, he said- "In the coming war cavalry would play a very important role, more so for us because we lack war elephants in our army. But developing a good cavalry force is proving to be very difficult because there isn't enough supply of war horses of good breed in the market. Devaputra, Chandra Gupta and Mahakshtrapa are acquiring as many horses as they can from the market and they are all trying to control the supply line and trade routes in their own ways. In this situation augmenting our cavalry force through purchase in the market does not seem viable. In my opinion the belief that good quality war horses can be bred only in Tushar and Kamboj is a myth. Last year we managed to breed two excellent colts from a Kamboji horse. I have increasingly come to believe that we can breed high quality horses in the Yaudheya land itself."

Commander Chitra said- "I agree with what Revtak says. We cannot expect our enemies to be lax enough to allow us to buy too many horses from the market. And Devaputra has strictly forbidden horse merchants from exporting mares. We have a stock of about ten thousand mares in the Yaudheya land. I think we could utilize those to breed our own horses."

We also decided that from now on we would observe a ban upon sale of horses and mares to outsiders. Our spies were keeping us informed about happenings at our neighbours' courts. We received the news that Chandra Gupta had already received detailed reports of our elaborate preparations and, therefore, he was getting restless to launch his invasion as soon as possible to deny us any more time to further consolidate our defences. The viceroy at Mathura had been issuing subtle warnings through collaborators like Jaluka. We humbly replied that Yaudheyas still value the peace terms offered by the late emperor Samudra Gupta and we had no desire to subvert the friendship and alliance of the Gupta empire.

Almost two years had passed since we had begun our defence preparations when we received news from our spies that a huge imperial army was marching towards our borders. Fortunately for us, our western and southern neighbours were still keeping quiet. Puruskrita Bappa summoned an emergency meeting of the council and briefed it about the current situation. A three member committee of war was constituted consisting of Puruskrita Bappa, me and Revtak. Later two representatives from our allies Arjunayans and Kunindas joined the war committee; their names were Dhanamitra and Shiva. We began by strengthening our fortifications along the border that connected the region east of Mathura with Strughan (Ambala). Most of our bigger cities lied near Indraprastha (Delhi) and so we suspected that the enemy might try to breach our lines here. So, Revatak, Madhava and I stationed ourselves near Indraprastha. Kurus (Meerut) had seized to be a republic for almost two thousand years now but they were not happy under the Gupta rule. Groaning under burdensome imperial revenue settlements, their sympathies lied with us. As soon as the imperial armies began to gather near Hastinapur, we were informed by them. The most alarming news that reached us was that the Guptan army had around five hundred war elephants. We had the choice of moving across the Yamuna and meeting the imperial army for a battle outside the Yaudheya areas but after some deliberations we decided against it. Crossing over to the other side would have threatened our supply lines. So we evacuated many villages along the bank and waited for the enemy to cross the river. One could see the vast imperial army encampment across Yamuna from the ramparts of our Indraprastha fort. We were not worried

about the chariots as we knew that it would be difficult for them to cross the river. Our crack troops had captured all the boats in the vicinity well before the arrival of the imperial armies. It was possible for them to bring boats from Mathura but they would have to cross three posts built by us along the streams. Our valiant sentries did not allow even a single Guptan boat to head upstream towards Indraprastha. So we waited patiently across the river.

The imperial army would beat drums and blow war trumpets all day, perhaps with the intention of scaring us. Madhava said- "They do not realize that such noises only increases our anger, unlike the armies of kings our army does not consist of mercenaries. We would sing war songs and beat trumpets as well. Our guess that the Guptas would try to cross the river with their contingent of war elephants proved right. After waiting for five days, they began the attack at mid-night. As the moon set, pitch darkness engulfed us. On both sides of the river, there were lakhs of men and yet it was so silent all around that we could hear ourselves breathing. And then we heard the noise of elephants wading through the river. Our soldiers prepared for battle- cavalry men mounted their horses, bowmen put their arrows and the infantry formed its columns. Because the enemy had decided to cross in the dark, our archers could not take aim but we had made other preparations about which they were unaware.

The elephants were crossing over in files of three, their movement in the water created enormous waves which hit our side of the bank. It would be a lie to say that we weren't scared, five hundred war elephants moving in unison is definitely a scary sight. As they approached the bank, we did not make any movement yet; except for our archers shooting a few arrows in their direction. We waited till small groups of twenty-thirty elephants were already on the bank, and then our archers began to shower them heavily with their arrows. The elephants then turned to the other direction, where we had already paved the ground with iron carpets bearing protruding sharp nails. We had also dug some ditches covered with grass and twigs. The elephants stepped over the nails or fell into ditches, and our cavalry charged ahead. The outcome of this battle was sealed within two hours, though the actual fighting continued till dawn. Most of the elephants which had crossed across were captured. A number of wounded men were also held prisoner, Gupta Baladhikrita (commander-in-chief) Vira Sena being among them.

Vira Sena was brought before me. I held both his hands and said politely- "Yaudheya republic welcomes Baladhikrita Vira Sena." He raised his eyes and gave me a faint smile.

I said- "Friend Vira Sena it is unfortunate that we meet again under such circumstances. But please be rest assured, we Yaudheyas do not stretch our enmities beyond the battlefield. You would be treated with dignity."

I made arrangement for his treatment and ensured that he was well looked after. As the day progressed we observed a very large number of soldiers standing in rows on the opposite bank, apparently awaiting orders. I was trying to guess what their next move could be- "Would the cavalry be sent in? Or would they send in their infantry first?" But in some hours the imperial army began to move in the opposite direction. Victorious war cries filled the air on our side of the bank. We had managed to score a victory relatively easily. I went along with Revtak and Madhava to Puruskrita Bappa's camp to report the situation to him. His joy knew no bounds; he embraced all three of us and ordered that riders be sent to Agrodka, Prithukda, Rohitki, Khandila, Bhadra and the capitals of our Kuninda and Arjunayan allies with the news that our troops had been victorious and that Guptas were retreating. Celebrations began in the Yaudheya land. In a few days time we arrived at Agrodka with the prisoners of war.

New Yaudheyas

It was a famous victory, however, though we basked in the glory, we knew fully well that Vikramaditya would return. All we had achieved through this victory was to hurt his pride, but his military strength was still intact. He would not forget and he wouldn't forgive us. We were under no illusions regarding Chandra Gupta's personal valour and ability as a general. He had erred on this occasion because he underestimated our strength and one could be certain that he would not repeat the same mistake the next time. Vira Sena was treated with dignity befitting his rank. We sent a message to Chandra Gupta stating that Vira Sena was being our guest for the time being and that he would be sent back once his wounds were healed. For the next few days a number of festivals were held to felicitate the victorious army. The republican council congratulated me and my associates for the successful campaign. It was particularly appreciative of the efforts put in by me, Revatak and Madhava Sena- I was the commander of the entire contingent stationed at Indraprastha, Revatak had captured Vira Sena alive and Madhava had overseen the digging of ditches and placing of nailed iron carpets to defeat the war elephants' contingent. Though we received more praise than the rest, I knew that it was the courage and zeal of the rank and file soldiers of our army that had

carried the day for us. Not just the men but even women had displayed extraordinary courage. We had been training our women to fight but it wasn't our intention to throw them into battles. Had we lost at the front, the brutal Gupta army would enter deep inside our borders. Then we would have to fight a protracted war for every inch of our land. We were aware that Chandra Gupta's intention was to conquer our land and turn it into a province of the empire, governed by a viceroy and the imperial bureaucracy. Once we were defeated he would not let the republic continue, even if we agreed to accept his sovereignty upon us. Vikramaditya's long term plan was to launch an attack upon Kamboj and Vahlik and for the purpose he needed a stone paved highway passing through the Yaudheya land. Aware that this would not be possible till our republic is completely smashed, he was prepared for a war till the end. We, on our part were determined that not a single one of us, including the women, children and old would bow to Vikramaditya and spend the rest of our lives as his slaves. So the war was expected to be a long one and most likely it would be fought not just in the open battlefields but also on the streets of our cities, in our villages, on our farmlands and within our homesteads. In this war to the end, none of the Yaudheyas, neither the old nor the women could hope to remain aloof. With this thought in our minds we had taken the decision to impart military training to our women. It certainly did not cross our minds that they could fight at the front as a part of our main army. At the battle of Indraprastha, some women had been allowed to accompany the army mainly for the purpose of cooking and attending to the wounded.

Had the battle not occurred at night, most probably the women's contingent would not have jumped into the battlefield, in contravention to my orders as the supreme commander. This insubordination in the battlefield was widely criticised, the matter was also discussed at the council but it was impossible for anyone of us to ignore the extraordinary courage they had shown during the course of the battle. At the council, I was among the first to criticise their conduct, but at the same time I felt it was necessary to add- "Revered councillors, I am certain that all of you are critical of the impulsiveness and insubordination displayed by the women's contingent on the battlefield. I am critical of it too. How do we tell the difference between a crowd and an army? A crowd may consist of thousands but it is different from an army because in the latter the soldiers march as per orders, in proper organization, with discipline and most importantly with a single collective objective and will. A crowd is different because it lacks a collective will, each individual thinks for himself and,

therefore, a crowd is bound to get pulled in many different directions at the same time. It is for this reason that an army of a few thousand can easily overcome a crowd consisting of lakhs. Yaudheyas need an army not a crowd, but unfortunately, the women's contingent with this willful act tried to convert it into the latter. This was a grave error and mustn't ever be repeated again. But at the same time, I am forced to admit, that we are the ones who must accept responsibility for forcing the women to commit this mistake. Aware of the brutality and inhumanity of our enemy we decided to train the women to wield weapons of war. But it did not for a moment cross our minds that once trained to fight like men, women cannot be forced to sit at home and do household chores, particularly so at a time like this. As the supreme commander of our army, I consider myself most responsible for the mistake that these women were forced into committing. This revered council reposed its confidence in Jai, it was his responsibility to seek its permission to organize women into regular fighting units. It is a folly to light a flame and then hope that it would not radiate light and heat. At a time when the enemy was threatening to destroy every ideal that we cherish and defend, these sword bearing women couldn't be expected to sit at the sidelines and watch silently. It is high time that we learnt to respect what these women demonstrated to us so vividly by joining this battle—they have as much right to fight and die for their motherland as we men. Some of us may like to dwell upon the technical and disciplinarian aspects of their joining the battle in defiance of the express orders of the leadership and they are not completely wrong but at the same time, and I think most of my revered councillors would agree with me here, their feats of bravery have also inspired a lot of pride amongst us. Sister Sunanda'a extraordinary courage and martyrdom would be remembered for as long as our glorious republic lasts. I remember her as an eager student and diligent learner but due to her easy and fun loving nature it never occurred to me that she could take life so seriously. Is there a single soul at Agrodka who hasn't laughed at her jokes sometime or the other? Fighting couples would come to her to get their differences sorted and they were seldom disappointed. Be it a wedding or a dance festival, Sunanda's wit and humour hogged the limelight everywhere. During my visits to Agrodka I would look forward to her friendly taunts and jibes. It is said that women lack sense of humour but Sunanda was a living proof of how wrong this presumption is; having always seen this aspect of her personality none of us expected that she could be such a fearsome warrior. Five war elephants of the enemy managed to dodge the ditches and iron-nailed carpets laid out by us and entered our ranks. The three sisters Sunanda, Nanda and Vasunanda attacked them along with twenty other women. It was a sort

of sight that one does not come across everyday- with her spear Sunanda pierced the eyes of two of these elephants. One of the elephants lifted her with its trunk and crushed her legs with its feet. Vasunanda chopped off its trunk with a slash of her sword, forcing it to turn back and run in agony. Sunanda's companions tried to lift her and move her away to safety but despite being in insufferable pain Sunanda ordered them to attack the remaining two elephants. This order was successfully carried out but we lost Sunanda. Revered councillors, is there a person in our vast land who would not be proud of a soldier like Sunanda? Everyone of her comrades has sustained numerous injuries. Vasunanda is seriously wounded but the Vaid (doctor) tells us that she would live. No honour that our republic can bestow is adequate enough to express our gratitude for the path that these brave women have shown to us. I request this house to grant women the same right to fight and die for our republic as we men possess."

What could not be accomplished in generations was achieved in a matter of a few minutes! Under threat from a mighty enemy our republic and people had transformed beyond recognition within a span of a few day. A few rich men like Jaluka still lived amongst us. I do not think that they would have minded much if Vikramaditya won. Their lives were a living proof of what my father used to say- 'wealth corrodes a man's soul.' They were lying low for the time being but we were aware that a snake does not cease to be deadly till its head its totally crushed. But at the moment we had the initiative and we well understood that it would be a folly to waste this opportunity. Convincing the council to end the discrimination against women in terms of joining the army was no small achievement, but there was no reason for us to become complacent. My next objective was to try and end the difference between rich and poor; if this could be done all would have a stake in the defence of the republic, transforming our land into an impregnable fortress built out of bricks that spontaneously glued with each other. But we were aware that presumptions about the eternity of private property had been reinforced over the course of thousands of years of the evolution of human society and it would not be easy to root them out within a decade or two. But we had to try. At the end of summers, when the land was being redistributed around fifty young men at Agrodka asked to be assigned land in common. For many days this unheard of act aroused people's curiosity and even ridicule. Perhaps their mockery would have been more explicit if Revtak and I too weren't among these fifty. Elders in particular were more severe in expressing their disapproval. But we saw no reason to feel disillusioned. After all we had taken a path that had been abandoned for thousands of

years. Though it is true that we did have slight trepidation in our hearts, invariably felt by those who dare to take a long forsaken highway but whatever small doubts we had vanished within the first month of beginning work upon our collective land. Poorer among Yaudheyas could not afford slaves or hire hands so they worked on their farms themselves. But at our collective farm at least half the men were such who owned numerous slaves and hired men. In fact with the recent infusion of prosperity under the aegis of Gupta court, some Yaudheyas had begun to look down upon manual labour. With the first monsoon shower, we set about our work. The land wasn't adequately soaked yet and so most of the Yaudheyas were waiting for the second shower. But we were already on the fields, ploughs in our hands. We had retained our slaves and hired men because we did not think it right to deprive them of their livelihoods. But we had to buy more ploughs and shovels as the masters too were working the fields now. We set aside pieces of land to sow different kinds of lentils and paddy. Some land was left fallow to be used next season to sow wheat. So commander-in-chief Jai set about ploughing the land, commander Revtak was seen digging the soil with his shovel, commander Madhava weeding the soil...women from affluent families gathered at the edge of the farm to stare at what was happening. This was good entertainment for most, soon the entire city came over to see what we were up to. Elders were heard saying- "This is momentary excitement. Farming is not a child's play. Four days of back breaking labour and they would be back in their homes."

We would work in the scorching sun. It would be a lie to say that we enjoyed working in the heat; a full day's hard labour done in the fields can leave blisters in the hands of a man unused to farming. Our hands and backs would start aching within the first two hours of toiling in the fields. During the first month most of our experiences were more or less unpleasant but warriors as most of us were, we welcomed the pain and toil with the same zeal as war wounds. Nanda said to her husband Revtak- "Aryaputra! you are panting, please rest your body for a while."

Revtak smiled and said- "Stop referring to me with such aristocratic epithets. I cannot decide whether referring to this mud smeared body as Aryaputra is an insult to the word or this pathetic body of mine."

"So how should I address you then?"

"Call me by my name, but if you insist upon using an epithet then choose from among the numerous creatures that flourish in mud-vermin, tick, termite whatever suits you."

She made a face and said- "If my brave warrior was deserving of such epithets, then trust me I would not have hesitated from honouring him with one."

"I would say a simple Revat or Revtak is just fine. And about resting, why don't you sit down as well, you must be tired too."

"But I cannot, I am the leader of the women's contingent."

"Is that so? In that case I guess I am lucky, our leader is Jai. So I can rest without worrying about setting a bad example for the rest of the team."

This conversation made me laugh and I said- "Nanda, I suggest you use your old trick of making him rub his nose in the dirt if he sits down to rest."

"Jai! You still remember, and you managed to drink all the milk from the pot."

"How could I forget that Nanda? You have always been such a bully."

"But on that occasion you tricked me Jai, prising open a clenched fist is far more difficult than beating a man in wrestling."

"And yet you were up to the challenge. Drenched in sweat, dupatta hung casually from the left shoulder, untied bun and dark black hair dishevelled over a face as divine as the moon itself."...

"Enough of your poetry Jai." Said Nanda, going red with embarrassment.

I said- "Poetry has its uses. See, all are taking a break from work now; Revtak and the twenty men of my team assigned the job of digging are all resting. I guess we cannot get used to such hard labour in a day or two. This exercise is as taxing as any other I know of."

Revtak- "In my opinion Jai, this is the best among all exercises. Besides training one's body, one also gets the earth to provide us food."

Nanda- "Jai why did you pull us into this mud and dirt? What were you thinking?"

Revtak- "She is right Jai. Look at these delicate hands, do they deserve to be working the fields? She could have been sitting on a nice chair at home with henna on her palms."

Nanda- "Yes Jai. And then when Revtak comes home I would have said coyly- 'Aryaputra, can you adjust my dupatta? It has slid down off my shoulders."

Revtak dropped his shovel immediately and began to adjust Nanda's dupatta- "Revtak is ready to be your humble servant even amidst this mud and slime, but alas! There is no henna on your palms."

Nanda- "Revtak, there is no need to be theatrical, see how many eyes are upon us. You are embarrassing both of us."

Revtak- "I am in character. Who cares about what people are thinking."

I said- "Go brother! Go!"

Nanda- "Do you wish to be forced on your knees again Jai? Remember, it's still the same Nanda."

This suddenly reminded be of Sunanda. Her thought saddened me and I said- "I would kneel before you a thousand times and I wish Sunanda was here. There isn't a warrior like her amongst us."

Everyone fell silent. In some while we got back to work.

When we began collective farming it never occurred to us how radically our lives were going to be transformed. Slaves and wage labourers felt this change the most. In our society slaves weren't treated any better than beasts of burden. The lot of wage labourers was only marginally, if at all, better. Those who hired them tried to squeeze out as much labour as possible at the minimum possible wages; humiliation and abuses were considered a necessary component of the master-servant relationship. Slaves and labourers were invariably fed stale leftovers that even the dogs were reluctant to touch. But now, at our collective farm we shared with them the same food that we ourselves ate- healthy wheat bread, fresh vegetables and refreshing buttermilk. As soon as lunch arrived people would run to grab their share. Even the beasts of burden were allowed a break and given fresh grass to eat. We sat in a circle to eat our meals, here there was no distinction between Yaudheyas and outsiders, men and women or masters and slaves. Liberal portions of butter would be applied to bread and buttermilk passed around in a circle. There was a great deal of laughter and fun while eating, masters or slaves all ate the same food. Somebody would say- "Today's chutney tastes like Urvashi or Rambha themselves might have descended from heaven to prepare it."

"Any person that can grind a chutney like that can stake claim to being divine."

"Shyama made it, feel like kissing her hands."

Earlier slaves-servants seemingly inhabited two parallel worlds, but since we began collective farming this chasm gradually began to fill up. We all felt that slaves-servants, craftsmen and traders settled in the

Yaudheya land must have the same political rights as Yaudheyas. But for the time being it seemed impossible because our entire political system was based on ties of blood. Though what he had managed to achieve here in a short span of time portended well for the future of our republic. By the time our crops ripened our slaves-servants had become different people- no longer dressed in rags or looking malnourished. And they looked cleaner now, so that nobody could despise them as being 'dirty people', anymore. They looked healthier, walked with a spring in their steps and looked into our eyes while talking. We took every care that they did not feel that we were doing them a favour by giving them more food to eat, clothes to wear and treating them like equals. These changes affected our productivity too, now they did not require to be supervised to work hard. Our yarn was finer than ever, beautiful clothes were woven out of it and whenever there was time swans, leaves-flowers etc were embroidered over them. We all understood now that whatever was being produced was meant for our own sake. One effect of this new order at our farm was that slaves-servants on other farms too began to express their discontents to their masters. Slaves did not have a choice but hired hands from all our neighbouring farms would come to us with the request that they be made a part of our collective. Masters had a tough time in getting their slaves-servants to work as they seemed lazier than ever in working on farms which did not make them co-sharers of its produce. Jaluka held out a piece of cloth woven by our slave Kumbhilak to his slave and said- "See how well he weaves! Why can't you be as good?" He said- "Master, is this comparison fair? Have you seen the kind of food he eats and the fine clothes he wears?" Jaluka wasn't the kind to let this ominous development pass silently. He began to talk to other slave owners and mobilize opinion against our social experiment. He had the firm backing of some of the elders. But we weren't caught unawares. Such an eventuality had been discussed; our youth clubs were still intact. There, apart from giving military training we were also imparting political education to the members. Our argument was that Vikramaditya had been wounded but not defeated. He was bound to return sooner or later and this time he would invade with a much bigger army than last time. Yaudheyas would be heavily outnumbered unless the slaves-servants too joined our ranks and this wasn't possible unless we eliminated the discrimination and deprivation faced by them. When our crops ripened we made an estimate of the produce and were thrilled to learn that our fields had turned out to be far more productive than those of our neighbours. All of us had worked very hard, we had ploughed the soil meticulously, weeded the farm diligently and made arrangements for the adequate irrigation of the crops. Indeed the fifty families of the collective

farm along with their slaves-servants comprised one big family now. We worked with enthusiasm and competed with each other in contributing to the collective wealth. But the biggest achievement, in my opinion was the change in the attitude of the children. There were almost a hundred children of various ages in our family, they would play around the farm while we worked and were often heard saying to the passers-by- "This huge farm belongs to us; we do not discriminate amongst ourselves." One day one of our children was sitting at the city square with his brothers and sisters, munching a huge cucumber. Then five-seven children who weren't from our collective came holding smaller cucumbers in their hands. One of them asked him- "Wow! That's a huge cucumber. Where did you get it?" He replied- "How would your cucumber be big? Your family is small and you own a small farm. Look at our family, it's so big and our farms are bigger so our cucumbers are bigger too." At this one of the children from the other group said- "As if we do not know what you do at your farm. Don't you share food with your ugly black servants' children?" He replied- "But we get to eat and you would have nothing to eat after a few months. Come to our house and see, we have heaps of grains there."

When I saw huge water tanks at Sinhala, I had thought, if we could construct similar ones at Yaudheya land our yield would grow manifolds. But hundreds of elephants would be required to build such tanks. And we also lacked the undulating topography of Sinhala that made it easier to dig canals and make the water flow to the farms. But I had another idea in my mind. At Agrodka, most of us depended upon our wells for irrigation but we had very few of them. So we decided to dig a number of new wells near our farm. Though we knew that these farms had not been granted to us in perpetuity and they could be taken away from us next year. It wasn't a common practice to rotate families' landholdings but one could not trust the councillors' greed for well irrigated farms. Knowing that we had the full confidence and backing of Puruskrita Bappa was a big relief; so we decided to go ahead with our plan without giving too much thought to the intrigues of the few influential rich merchants and elders in the council. Our successes had also inspired enthusiasm among the members of our youth clubs. They were willing to back our initiatives. So when we presented our plan to build fifty wells every year, they readily agreed to implement it. And we also decided against starting with our own farm, not because we feared that this farm might be taken away from us. The reason was that after some deliberation we felt that promoting the spirit of collective labour among our people should get priority over our objective of increasing yields of our own farm. By the time rains stopped, we had

harvested our crops and begun preparations to sow for the next season. We ploughed the fields very fine taking care to flatten up every pebble, and then sowed our best handpicked seeds. Most of the land was set aside to sow wheat but we also sowed some mustard, peas, grams and barley. Though we had done as best as we could, being dependent upon autumn rains as we were, one could not be certain that the yield would be good. As soon as the sowing was over, we set about our decision to dig wells. Almost all young men and women and even servants-slaves were taking part. A large group of men and women started chopping trees from the forest, yet another group was engaged in making clay bricks. Meanwhile we also took care that our crops were properly manured with cow dung. Thankfully autumn rains were good but we could not feel rest assured yet as there was still the danger of hail storms during the coming winters. Not till we reaped our crops in the spring, did we feel free of anxiety. The yield had surpassed even the high standard we had set in the last season. During the last autumn we had set up huge kilns to bake our bricks and began digging wells at pre-decided locations. Our first effort at collective farming had been circumspect and apprehensive but resolute. But by the time we reaped our second crop, our enthusiasm had redoubled. Not only did we feel much more hopeful about the future, but we also discovered that collective labour could be lot of fun. We worked according to a set time table, setting aside ample time to eat and rest. Singing while working had always been a succour to the working men but now a number of new songs were being composed. Some of these had been composed in the praise of Jai which embarrassed me a great deal. Group dancing and singing were some of our favourite pastimes in the evenings. Leaders like me, Revtak and Madhav had less time for entertainment as we would often be required to convene planning meetings but we made it a point to be present at these convivial gatherings whenever we had time.

But the time our wells got ready, two and a half months were still left before the arrival of monsoon and the beginning of the next sowing season. Agrodka had some water bodies but we needed to increase their number and sizes. So this year we decided to dig a new artificial lake. Thousands of shovels and buckets were gathered and work began. It was summer season and summers can be quite harsh at Yaudheya land. So we decided to work only during the first half of the day, late afternoons and early evenings. The transformation in the attitude of our people was amazing, till last year women from relatively affluent families spent the day preening themselves. The delicate beauties who could not tolerate a speck of dust on their foreheads now laboured hard in the fields and carried their mud and

dirt smeared clothes upon their bodies as though it was some sort of badge of honour. One day, when we gathered for a convivial gathering, Nanda said to me in a taunting tone- "Jai, one would think that you have a secret agenda of purging feminine beauty from the Yaudheya land."

Before I could say something, Revtak jumped in and said- "I am in full agreement with my better half here. Yaudheya women had just begun to be appreciated, but see what Jai has done to them. Nanda's palms used to be soft pinkish in complexion and delicate as flowers, but see how ugly and rough they look now. Poor thing..."

Nanda said, getting somewhat agitated- "That will do Revtak! There is no need for you to try and be a poet like Jai."

Revtak- "She wouldn't even let me shed tears upon her misfortune. What wrong did I do?"

I interrupted Revtak midway and said- "Nanda, punish me in the manner you consider befitting this unpardonable crime and I would readily accept it provided that first you prove your claim that Yaudheya women are indeed losing their charm."

Revtak- "So now you want to rub salt upon an open wound! What would you know about their plight. They might not say it but their hearts are bleeding. Look at this body, it used to be covered with several layers of fat smooth as butter. So smooth that if one was not careful one's hand could slip over it. I too am crying for what my Nanda used to be till a year ago."

Nanda- "It would seem that you desire not a woman but a buffalo."

Revtak- "Don't say so my precious! My Nanda never used to be like this. And come to think of it, even if she was like this any Yaudheya would be proud. Yaudheya land's buffaloes are renowned for their beauty. Have you seen their curvaceous horns, bright shiny skin, hanging breasts and round bellies that reach upto the ground? Which one of our neighbours wouldn't covet them?".

I- "So this is how you define feminine beauty?"

Revtak- "You disagree with me Jai! The other day you gave us such a long lecture when some of us expressed doubts over the importance of this wonderful beast to us."

Nanda- "Jai! It's all your fault. In your company commander Revtak has begun to fancy himself as not just a poet but also a connoisseur of feminine beauty. If this is how he insists upon defining beauty then who is stopping him from imitating it on his own self?"

Revtak- "I would not hesitate from doing so Nanda, but sadly I cannot. Jai would not let it happen. Nowadays I feel jealous whenever I see Jaluka's wife."

I laughed and said- "So our dear friend has been eyeing Jaluka's wife lately."

Revtak- "Jai, are you trying to make us, husband and wife, fight?"

I- "Of course not, why would I want that. But why don't you tell Nanda what you desire- that she should be forever at home, expectant."

Nanda frowned at Revtak and said- "Like a real buffalo. Sunken eyes, plump cheeks, sagging breasts and a protruding belly! What's wrong with my man?"

Revtak- "I beg your pardon, but a woman's beauty lies in what pleases a man's eyes."

Nanda- "A man like you?! Jai, my man's heart is black as charcoal. I was talking about making Yaudheya women prettier and he would like it if I looked like Jaluka's wife."

Revtak- "Do not get me wrong Nanda but if you want pink palms and buttery soft skin then you would have to be Jaluka's wife."

I- "I am sorry Nanda but I would have to agree with Revtak here. If you want plenty of milk-butter to eat, be in the shade all time, lie on the bed all day with numerous servants at your beck and call then there is no choice but to be Jaluka's wife."

Vasunanda had been keeping quiet all this while but now she felt the need to speak- "Do you have nothing better to do than talk about the definition of feminine beauty?"

I- "I think you are a suitable person to resolve this debate."

Revtak- "Of course she would want to be the judge, her golden hair glows all the more in the blazing sun. A pretty woman like her need not fear competition in the entire Yaudheya land. But Vasu! Keep this in your mind before you pass your verdict; the creator had given you the gift of beauty because he wanted you to adorn the royal palaces, but Jai is trying to kill you by making you working in the scorching sun."

Vasunanda- "So brother Revtak, now you are trying to pull my legs."

Revtak- "Vasu! How could I take on single handedly a warrior to whom even Vikramaditaya's armies could not proye a match? I have my own definition of beauty, why don't you share yours with us? But be careful, it shouldn't be a definition that makes an exception of you."

Nanda- (kissed Vasunanda's forehead and said)- "My poor little sister, now we know that your brother-in-law's words sting as much as his arrows in the battlefield."

Revtak- "Let her speak for herself. If she has a good enough definition, Revtak would happily agree to it."

Vasunanda- "In that case listen, this is my definition for what makes a male body attractive and it is equally applicable to women. The body should be muscular but without a trace of accumulated fat. Firm shoulders, broad chest and thin waist and fists as strong as steel..."

"You mean exactly like Jai."

Vasunanda got embarrassed and hid herself behind Nanda.

Before the arrival of monsoon we completed the digging of our artificial lake. We surrounded it with high embankments from all sides and planted Sheesham seeds over it. When the monsoon came the lake filled up; it was an amazing sight. Puruskrita Bappa called a big get-together to celebrate the new lake; it was named Sunanda-Sagar.

Marriage

I had seen Vasunanda a few times earlier. I had thought of her as no more than an innocent child then. After she got injured at the battle of Indraprastha, I would often visit her. Though she had numerous big and small wounds on her body, the most dangerous one was the spear injury on the lower left side of her stomach. The spear had narrowly missed her liver or probably she would not have survived. The vaid had applied antiseptics and quickly stitched it up. But she kept hanging between life and death for many days, often losing consciousness during this period. Due to excessive loss of blood her face had gone pale. Puruskrita Bappa visited her daily and spent some hours sitting next to her. Sunanda had not lived to see how grateful her people were to her for her sacrifice but Vasunanda was lucky in this regard. Hundreds of Yaudheyas would flock to catch a glimpse of the 'heroine of the battle of Indraprastha'. Though Vasunanda seemed to enjoy the attention she was getting, soon it began to get so crowded that we had to put a check on the number of visitors to ensure that she got proper rest. During this period Nanda would be seen sitting next to her all the time. After her wounds had healed somewhat and she regained some of her strength, Nanda said to me- "Jai! She loves listening to you talk. Every time you narrate some story from your travels

she gets curious and then she cannot stop talking about it. I think we must ensure that she remains in good spirit, it's good for her recovery."

From then on till she became strong enough to walk around, I would spend an hour or two with her every day. Then her face still had a sick ashen look about it but her big searching eyes and two faint black lines over them still made her look pretty. There was a strange hypnotizing appeal about her calm demeanour. Her voice was feeble but pleasing to my ears. And whenever I narrated some funny incident related to Chandra's childhood her two petal like lips would part to reveal a brilliant white line that illuminated her beautiful face in its wake. One day I was narrating the story of my shipwreck. When I told her about flailing my limbs around, alone in the vast ocean under a star lit sky her eyes widened; as if she was trying to imagine what that scene might have been like and she said- "I wonder what that battle must have been like."

I - "But Vasu, I doubt it that you can imagine it unless you see for yourself what it is like to be alone in the middle of an unending mass of water."

Vasunanda- "Actually I can, that's why I am jealous."

I- "Like I am jealous of your wounds."

Vasunanda- "There is nothing to feel jealous about in this. There was hardly any time to fight death. Within moments our fates were decided. Death embraced sister Sunanda and spared me, I do not even remember how much time I spent in the wrestling ring before death held my hand and chucked me out of the arena"

Nanda- (Caressing her golden hair)- "My precious! She does not even know how hard she had to fight. Your duel with death lasted full six days."

I- "And I got to fight no more than five-six hours."

Vasunanda- "And now probably you will say that your battle was nothing in comparison as you were comfortably sleeping on a wooden board. But think about it like this; death is on prowl, seeking its prey assuming its most terrifying form and what does it see? A man, nicely curled up on a wooden board, completely oblivious to danger that lurks upon him. Poor death! How embarrassed it must have felt? Sister, what would you say about this sort of bravery?"

Nanda- "I agree with you completely Vasu. Jai does so many things and then tries to make them sound ordinary but we know that they express qualities like courage, steadfastness and nobility."

I- "It is gratifying to hear these things coming from you Nanda but let's be honest here- is it not true that Vasunanda's courage and patience surpass everything that I have done so far? I think you hesitate in saying this in so many words; so let me ask Vasunanda a question- "Why did you jump into the battle that day? Who inspired you?"

Vasunanda- "Sister Sunanda inspired all of us." Her eyes brimmed up as she continued- "But she would not let me join the battle that day. Neither would sister Nanda" and she turned towards Nanda and smiled."

Nanda- "Because we did not want that all three of us should perish at the same battle field; and Jai, you tell me, who would want to send their sixteen year old child to the battlefield..."

Vasunanda- "I guess I should have sat at home and played with dolls, right? But who took away dolls from children's hands and taught them to wield the sword?"

Nanda "Jai, who else? And despite this when the time to put it to use came, we were ordered by the commander-in-chief to stay away from the battlefield! Jai! why did you take away our dolls if you did not intend to let us fight the enemy like men? And Vasu! To top it all we were censored at the council for striking down the Gupta invaders. Do you know who was the first person to censor us at the council?"

Vasunanda- "Who was it sister?"

Nanda- "This same person who is sitting mum here, acting as though he has achieved equanimity like Buddha."

Vasunanda- "Our commander-in-chief Jai!"

Nanda- "And..."

I- "Shall I be given a chance to speak in my defence?"

Nanda- "Why should I? After what I heard you say at the council? You know Vasu, when he started speaking at the council I felt so angry that I felt my head would burst. But did I have a choice? These men have not even given us the right to speak at the council. No wonder all their judgements about women are one sided."

I- "Your sister is saying the exact opposite of what actually transpired at the council that day.And she isn't even giving me a chance to speak in my defence."

Nanda- "Did you give us a chance to speak in our defence at the council?"

I- "Did I not say at the council that women too should be given the right to take part in battles and did the council not accept this motion?"

Vasunanda's face lit up as she heard this. She gave me a respectful glance and said- "So our commander-in-chief did not just put swords in our hands but also secured for us the right to use them. Is this true sister?"

Nanda- "Ok he did, but only after humiliating us publicly for our 'lack of discipline'.

I- "Did I not say that as commander-in-chief of the army, I am myself to blame for this act of 'indiscipline'?"

Vasunanda- "Let's not be harsh on our commander-in-chief sister, he has always sided with women. And now, by securing the right to fight for women, he has done a great favour to us."

I- "We have done you no favour, you wrested this right for yourself through your courage and sacrifice."

Gradually as she recovered her pale cheeks turned pink, her emaciated face regained its earlier fuller shape, her eyes looked bigger and rounder and her golden hair shined brighter than ever. She could sit with me for hours listening to my stories, at the end of which she would bombard me with a barrage of questions. By the time we started collective farming she could walk around a bit. One day she saw Nanda returning from the fields covered in dust and said- "When I first heard about collective farming I did not think that it could actually be good for you. Now I realize that tiny droplets of sweat on the forehead and specks of yellow-brown dust on the face make a woman look prettier."

Nanda- "I am happy that you are not allowed to be at the farms yet. Too many noisy girls of your age at the farm...they are a pain in the neck"

Vasunanda- "Me a noisy girl?"

Nanda- "You are Nanda and Sunanda's sister, can we expect any better from you."

Vasunanda- "But sister, I do not understand ! Why are all the girls so eager to be at the farm?"

Nanda- "For the same reasons that you were so eager to go into the battle that day despite our warnings."

Vasunanda- "No, but this is different. Why would they want to work the fields? What sort of magic is our commander working?"

Nanda- "And work is done in such an entertaining manner that one never feels bored. Groups of girls sing songs while working; it seems as though sickle and shovel have assumed a life of their own. And so many new songs have been composed."

Vasunanda- "When I get better, I too would go with you to work in the fields."

Nanda- "Jai!, you are right, there isn't another one like him- always ready to lead by example, forever ready to jump into a fireball for the good of his people. It isn't at all surprising that thousands of Yaudheyas today back his plans. How many women would have agreed to come to the fields in the blazing sun till last year? But look at our farms now, there are as many women as men. Now we have weeding songs, threshing beats and winnowing melodies. Even haymaking seems like fun."

Vasunanda- "I would like being there as well."

Nanda- "I know that Vasu, once fully recovered you wouldn't feel like being away from the fields."

Vasunanda- "Yes because from what you tell me, it seems more like fun than work."

Vasunanda's wounds were still not completely healed when she started coming to the collective farm despite elders' advising against it. When the time to harvest the wheat crop came, young girls decided to celebrate the Annapoorna festival. Vasu was decorated as Annapoorna (goddess of agrarian fertility and prosperity). Her golden hair was decked up with fresh vine and fresh yellow wheat stalks and blue linseed flowers were braided into it. She wore a garland made of fresh green gram seeds and from her ears hung earrings made out of beautiful flowers. In one hand she held a richly embellished pot and in the other green mango blossoms and green barley stalks. Other young girls similarly decked up, followed her humming melodious tunes. This was followed by pair-dancing. When Vasu's turn to choose a partner came her friends smiled and pointed towards me. She got embarrassed and could not gather the courage to ask. So I asked her myself whether she would like to dance with me.

This was the first time that I had danced with Vasunanda. I have already told you that our harvest was excellent that year. A number of new songs were composed and sung.Our year long hard work was radiating through beaming faces all around.

I had a house of my own in which I lived alone. At times my two sisters would come over and their children would lighten up the house with their giggles. I started spending most of my time at Revtak's house. Gradually as our youth clubs got more organized my house began to double up as a place for holding meetings. My cattle were sent to Revtak's cow shed and mine was transformed into a stable. I would eat my meals at

Nanda's kitchen. Many more families joined our collective farm the following year.Though our farms were collective, the harvest was distributed among all in proportion to the effort put in by them; farm labourers and slaves too were given equal shares. In fact they were no longer slaves and labourers; we had already abolished slavery on our farm, though they still willingly chose to live with us. Despite all this, it was still a distant dream for us to secure equal political rights for them in the republic.

After she got well, Vasunanda too came to live with her sister. We would meet everyday. But as time passed she began to grow shy of me. Generally it isn't easy to notice changes in person that one comes across everyday, but I can say that I saw her grow prettier day by day. Nature had already endowed her with an excellent physique, now through working in the fields, dance and military training it was getting even more chiselled. If I asked her a question, she would reply to the commander-in-chief politely. But now her gaze would not fix upon my face like before. Her beauty had an enchanting quality about it. At times I would notice her stealing a glance at me.

I had begun to look upon her as a special girl since the day I heard of her bravery in the battlefield and saw her injured body. For over a year, I would often cite her example as a model of bravery and dedication to the republic. But later I began to hesitate, mainly to avoid Nanda's constant jokes. In retrospect I think she had already sensed my feelings towards Vasu; feelings of which I myself remained oblivious for a long time. For quite some while I used to consider myself a dispassionate admirer of her beauty and virtues. Then one day hearing me heap praises upon her someone smiled. Since that day I began to hesitate from talking about her in public. I think this happened after the day I danced with her.

We had been steadily improving our agriculture, now we felt that we must make Yaudheya rich in cattle wealth as well. I felt satisfied that by banishing poor breed cattle we were gradually improving the progeny. We were very hopeful that owing to the steps we had taken, we would not have to depend upon Kabul, Kamboj and Sindh for the next generation of war horses. And we were also taking steps now to improve the quality of our crafts. But we all realized that our biggest asset were our children and youth upon whom depended the future glory of our beautiful land. Fortunately for us, we already had an excellent system in place for a healthy and hardy upbringing of our children. On one occasion the quality of our children became the topic of our discussion. Yaudheyas had seen our cattle improve in the past few years and they knew that this could not have

happened without the steps taken by us. This had led many to believe that the same could be done about human children as well. Though I generally did not hesitate in candidly expressing my opinions over such matters, Madhava was particularly forthright in voicing his views regarding this issue. One day he said at a meeting of young army commanders- "We have done enough to improve our cattle, now we must concentrate upon making the next generation of Yaudheyas better."

Revtak- "What do you mean? I hope you aren't suggesting that like we banished short-ugly horses and bulls beyond the Yamuna, we must ban certain Yaudheyas too from reproducing."

Madhava- "You need not worry Revtak, neither you nor sister would have to go across the Yamuna. In fact, keeping in mind the high breed of three Yaudheyas you have reproduced, I suggest that you must produce many more to serve our republic better."

I- "Meaning that we must ask sister Nanda for many more able children. One baby an year isn't enough, we insist that Nanda should try to produce at least two every year for the republic."

Revtak- "I agree with Jai. Either she must produce one baby every six months and if she hasn't been able to acquire as much command upon nature as yet then at least she could try to produce twins-triplets every year. And it is my humble request that my dear friend Madhava must be given the responsibility to carry the message of this solemn assembly to Nanda."

At this all said in one voice- "Brother Jai's advice is sound. Madhava must carry this message to sister Nanda himself."

Madhava needed to wriggle out of this difficult predicament, so now he said- "My dear friends, I think this honourous task must be carried out by commander Jai himself; and we all know that he is the only one who can convince sister Nanda. Remember how he had managed to trick her and get hold of the milk pot?" Now everyone turned towards me. Madhava continued- "Moreover, I would not want to take credit for an idea that originally emanated from the bright mind of our commander in chief. Brother Jai, why don't you tell everyone about this ancient republic in Greece that you were talking about the other day. If I remember correctly, they had a full fledged law in place to ensure healthy progeny."

Everyone said in unison- "We would all like to hear about this republic and its laws."

I said- "Yes, it is true. Among the many republics of Greece one was Sparta. They had an old tradition- whenever a child was born, he was left

alone at the top of a mountain. If he could survive the heat and cold for twenty four hours he was brought back to be raised as a citizen but if he couldn't, it was assumed that he wasn't worthy of being a citizen of Sparta. This practice ensured that the weaker offsprings were eliminated at birth itself."

Bandhuk said- "But this tradition cannot be adopted by us Yaudheyas, thanks to our non-violent Jain brothers."

Madhav- "Of course, if they had their way they wouldn't even let us get rid of bedbugs and fleas." The other day I was saying to Jaluka- "Merchant-lord! Do something, the poor race of bed bugs are being slaughtered by millions.Yaudheyas have become so cruel that they put boiling water over the legs of their beds and give them terrible boiling deaths. I would say that you must start a campaign to protest against this terrible practice and earn good karma by saving millions of lives." Jaluka looked at my sober-pained expression and thought that my concern was genuine. He said- "No wonder at all! Since this atheist Jai has arrived our people have begun to make fun of the noble path shown by our Arhats. If he had his way, instead of sending our cattle across the Yamuna he would have had us eat them. Who will speak up for the poor bedbugs?" I said- "In fact I have already thought about it. My suggestion is that you should gather all the older beds from Agrodka and replace those with new ones. And these beds may then be placed at a new inn dedicated to providing sanctuary to the oppressed race of bedbugs. The stingy old miser then said- "But that is no solution. If we were to take away all these bed bugs from their host families to a desolate inn then wouldn't they die of hunger? I said- "Good question! After all bed bugs cannot go vegan. But I think you could solve that problem by paying some people to sleep at your inn and provide nourishment to the bed bugs." At this, he smiled and said- "Must you involve money in everything?" How on earth could one hope to introduce Spartan traditions here when such apostles of non-violence live in our midst?"

Revtak- "I am sure Spartans were a very strong people."

I- "Yes, very strong and brave. Weak, short and meek men and women were not to be seen among them."

Revtak- "We Yaudheya's too could make some customs similar to Sparta to improve our progeny."

I- "But we are not cattle. We cannot compel men and women to reproduce with specific partners to ensure good offsprings. Humans cannot be subjected to animal like controls. And more importantly physical

strength isn't the decisive criteria to judge the worth of a human, we did not conquer nature through the use of brute force. There is no reason why a physically weak person must turn out to be a destitute of intellect too. Even if it was so, we would never subject our parents and children to the cruel Spartan experiments."

Madhav- "So are you suggesting that we may do nothing to improve Yaudheya's progeny?"

I- "May be we could encourage healthy-strong parents to have more children."

Bandhuk- "In that case Jai, you must talk to Revtak and Nanda they would not say no to you. Gandhari bore a hundred children for Dhritarashtra, I would say that Nanda and Revtak must produce at least twenty to secure the future of our glorious republic."

Revtak- "Careful Bandhuk! Nanda would not be too pleased. If I were you, I would pray that she doesn't hear this or you might lose the few remaining strands of hair that you nurture on that balding head of yours."

Madhav- "And what do you suggest we do with men like Jalulka? Ban them from marrying?"

I- "We can only hope that the path of liberation and enlightenment that our women are treading would make them allergic to such cowards and destitutes of wisdom as Jaluka."

Madhav- "So all we can do is to hope that our future generations would choose wisely?"

I- "Yes, but there is no need to sound so pessimistic about this. Future belongs to the next generation and I am very hopeful that they would build upon what we are trying to do. And why, if a woman feels that she did not choose wisely, we can always use our old custom of letting her divorce her partner."

Madhav- "And what happens of people like Jaluka who are left alone?"

Revtak- "I have a solution. They could be sent to Jaina-Buddhist viharas to be monks for the rest of their lives."

Everyone laughed. Madhav said- "Brother Jai! We have spent so many years at these monasteries ourselves but this never occurred to us. Revtak dear, do not be under any sort of illusion, these shaven head-naked saints are very well connected. Many of them own several houses across the realm and devout followers serve them the best food they can afford. Actually monks are quite well off; they do not suffer at all."

Revtak- "From what I am hearing, I think we ought to stop making fun of these saints and monks, they are actually quite clever; they have chosen their vocation wisely."

Madhav- "I second that opinion! And let me add that it would be a grave mistake to insult them. Respect them for the sake of our forefathers and the generations to come, terrible miseries await those who do not revere these great souls."

Revtak- "So we must revere them. Add to this the fact that monasteries are rolling in wealth and then there is always the temptation of attaining Niravana-heaven."

Madhav- "Meaning that as well meaning parents we must shephard all our children to monasteries."

Bandhuk- "That old fox is very clever. At an age when he should be gradually starving himself to death at some Jain monastery, he has brought a young wife for himself from Mathura. In my opinion, such men are a blight for our country."

Yaudheya land was going through a very exciting phase of intellectual brainstorming. I considered this a very positive development that augured well for our future.

Nanda really got to know of the joke Madhav and Bandhuk had been making about Revtak and her. One evening as dancing was beginning at the theatre Nanda saw Madhav and Bandhuk and dashed towards them. Madhav saw her coming and quickly slipped away through the crowd but Bandhuk was caught unawares. By the time he noticed Nanda his right hand was already in her iron grip.

"Why Bandhuk? You think you are very funny?"

No, Nanda! It's a lie, somebody's been trying to mislead you. I swear on my life."

Revtak- "Oh look at you now! Why don't you repeat what you were saying that day?"

Bandhuk- "Nanda! Trust me, I do not know what they are talking about. I am ready to go down on my knees and apologize if any of it is true, but trust me it isn't."

Mangalak- "And weren't you saying that we should send Nanda to Jaluka's inn. She could help feed the bed bugs for one dinar."

Now Nanda held Bandhuk's shoulders and began to shake him up.

Bandhuk was begging- "Mercy! Nanda please! They are making up stories. Brother Jai! Please ask her to stop."

Nanda shaking him more violently- "Invoking the mercy of commander-in-chief, aren't you? Let the commander-in-chief worry about state matters, this isn't his business."

I- "Forgive me Nanda! Your brother-in-law is your slave forever. But I did not hear him say anything about Jaluka's inn for bed bugs."

Now Nanda let go of Bandhuk and lunged at Mangalak. But both managed to escape through the crowd of laughing onlookers.

Three years had passed since victory. Vasunanda was nineteen now and her youth and beauty were in full bloom. We would often dance together. Whenever I was at Agrodka, she would bring lunch for me. At times we would just sit and chat. But we hadn't yet let it be known to people that we were in love. Though there were no apparent obstacles- she was Nanda's sister afterall; but I was very busy with my work now. Since the end of the first year of collective farming I had hardly been able to work even on our own farm. By now collective farms had come up at other Yaudheya cities and villages too, and I would often be invited to lend advice. I was also in-charge of training the new military units that had come up in the past few years. Most of my time was spent on the horseback, there was so much work that often it would be difficult to get a full night's sleep. But I was fully satisfied with my life. I was seeing all my dreams actualize right before my eyes. Even small children would be seen play-acting the battle with Vikramaditya's army- five-six children would wrap a blanket and be Vikramaditya's elephant, and then three would become the three Yaudheya sisters and attack it with arrows and spears. The game would end in the capture of the Gupta general. At times watching twelve years old kid riding horses without saddles brought tears into my eyes. Our dreams of a free and strong republic were coming true.

One day I had returned to Agrodka after one of my tours. As usual, Nanda had come over with lunch. She started a conversation- "Jai, I got to know later that it wasn't entirely Bandhuk's fault; poor guy! I was unnecessarily harsh. Isn't it true that making couples produce more children was your idea?"

I looked at her smiling face and said- "So was I wrong Nanda? I am so proud of the four lion cubs that you have brought into this world, if we could have sixteen more of such lads the entire republic would thank you."

Nanda- "And if there were to be thirty six more of them?"

I- "Wow! If that could happen, I would kiss your feet and hire drummers to celebrate."

Nanda slapped my back affectionately and said- "You are very naughty Jai."

I- "So you are calling me naughty now, what's on your mind Nanda?"

"It means..." Nanda again slapped both my cheeks gently.

"So for some reason Nanda is being very affectionate towards this humble servant. Seems like lady luck is going to shine upon me today."

"That precisely is what I intend to do, to make the lady luck shine upon you."

"How?"

"Out of the forty children you wanted for the republic, I want twenty to be yours."

"Of course! It would be a privilege..."

"Shut up! Stop acting like a child now. It's high time that you get serious about your life."

"Order me sister-in-law, has this humble servant of yours ever defied your will."

"Then listen- you must get married and produce twenty children."

"Married? You are asking me to get married?"

"And why shouldn't you? If you intended to remain single then you might as well have stayed at the Buddhist monastery."

"But I would need a bride to get married."

"I know of a girl who likes you. And she is such a beauty that even the Apsaras of Indra's heaven would be embarrassed to be compared to her."

"And where is this Apsara to be found?"

Nanda dropped her voice and whispered to me- "I have already talked to her, your assent is all I need now."

"But let me hear first who this heavenly beauty is."

"Jaluka's elder daughter."

I looked at her with disbelief and said- "And you want me to have twenty brave Yaudheyas with her."

"No, not Yaudheyas, bed bugs. And they may reside at the heavenly inn built by Jaluka. Leave the task of giving birth to brave Yaudheyas to me."

"But Bandhuk was suggesting that she be sent to a monastery."

"Does she have a choice? Poor thing! She is already thirty but nobody would marry her. Had things been like before, Jaluka could have paid some young man some thousand dinars and married her off. But thanks to you even that is not possible now, everyone wants a girl who works the fields and looks like Menaka or Tilottama."

"So you have taken it upon yourself to help out these tormented unmarried women."

"Guptas are earning merit from protecting the cows, it occurred to me that we Yaudheyas too must take up some cause to counter their popularity."

"You might be brave enough to carry this responsibility but I am afraid, this humble servant of yours is not strong enough to be up to the task."

Nanda smiled and said- "Ok, let me ease your burden a bit."

"Nanda stop talking in riddles, see I haven't been able to finish even half of my lunch yet."

Nanda reclined over me and whispered into my ear- "Would you want to marry Vasunanda?"

I kissed her forehead and said- "Of course I would Nanda."

"So you mean you are willing to accept my order?"

"Not once but a thousand times, provided Vasu accepts me worthy of this honour."

Nanda dashed out of the room and within moments she had returned with Vasu holding her hand- "Vasu! Do not be shy. I have already warned Jai that my little sister is crazy about you and so he better pay some attention to you."

Vasunanda's face had gone red. With a contorted expression she was staring at Nanda's face and struggling to get her hand free. By now I had finished my lunch; I washed my hands and said- "Vasu! you know what Nanda is like, she cannot spare even her own little sister. It was in fact I who brought up this topic; if you are willing, this humble servant would like to serve you for the rest of his life."

Vasu's contorted face eased up, she looked at me for a moment and then looked away. That one look from her big eyes got etched in my memory for the rest of my life. She had but looked at me for a second and yet managed to convey so much that our ancient poets could have composed an entire epic about it.

Nanda now made me stand up holding my hand and said- "Jai get up, my sister has gone deaf, I accept your proposal on her behalf. Now touch my feet and seek blessings. I bowed to touch her feet, then she put Vasu's hand in my hand and said- "Now on Vasu belongs to you and you to her." And then tears flowing from her eyes she said- "I have fulfilled my duty, go and lead happy lives."

Our Children are Our Only Future

Paddy had never been grown at Agrodka, but now we were pushing every boundary dictated by tradition. Beautiful healthy Basmati seeds had been brought from Khaltika and planted over ten acres of land. One day Vasu and I went to see the paddy fields. The crop was almost two feet high by now. Like froth over sea waves, small clouds were littered over a clear blue sky. We were walking by the fields when dense black monsoon clouds began to appear on the eastern horizon. A cool breeze was rustling through the paddy field swaying it like small ripple waves running over the surface of a green lake. Some strands were bent, and some were standing upright making them look like the undulations of a passing waves. As we walked through the field leaves brushed against our hands. I plucked out a few of them. Vasu was also feeling the delicate leaves against her palm. But when she saw the plucked leaves in my hand she said- "My love! look at these paddy fields, they are so beautiful, they are so delicate on our hands, why did you have to pluck them?" As she was saying this, I noticed that there was pain in her eyes. I dropped the plucked leaves, held her hand and said- "You are right my love, these delicate leaves are meant to be felt, their beauty is to be savoured through eyes, I shouldn't have plucked them." Just then a bolt of lightning flashed in our eyes and we turned towards the east. Black clouds had by now covered half of the sky and were scurrying forward to engulf the whole of it. Then another bolt of lightning flashed over us.

Vasu- "Jai! Look at these black clouds. They look like some huge fireball is burning somewhere on wet fuel, causing these giant smoke clouds to rise up and engulf the sky."

I- "And the fire has been smouldering for a very long time causing occasional sparks to shoot out of it."

"Why are we so scared of lightning?"

"Because of its deafening roar; and it incinerates whatever it falls upon."

"How often do you hear of people dying because they were hit by a lightning? There are other far more plausible threats to a man's life."

"If man had his way, he would want to grow rice without its bran. But if bran wasn't there, the entire crop would have been wiped out by birds in the fields."

"If there were no threats to our lives we would become inert-lifeless."

"Not just our bodies but our minds too. Man would have been little more than a dead mass of organic matter."

"That state would not have been worthy of being called life."

"I agree, motion is the other name for life. Motion presents itself in a new form every moment and each one of these moments is beautiful in its own way. When we sowed the paddy saplings they were quite small, not more than a few inches in height and more yellow than green. Young women planted these small saplings inside their houses and covered them up with baskets. What did they look like then?"

"Yellowish, slightly white."

"By the time we planted them in the fields they weren't so yellow anymore. They could hardly stand on their own in the flooded fields. Then they stood up, lost their yellowness, turned green and finally they have turned blackish green. Now they are becoming top heavy; in some days their heads would become so heavy that their thin stems would look like they wouldn't be able to hold their weights."

"I have never seen a full grown paddy."

"We have only just begun cultivating paddy at Agrodka, you will see them very soon."

"Why do they become top heavy?"

"Because dissipating away gradually after reaching its fullest possible extent is a law/ Dharma that no life form may escape. And there is another law which supersedes the first one- bringing into being another life form in its lieu."

Vasu put both her arms around my shoulders and I leaned forward to embrace her lips with a warm kiss."

She said- "It is a beautiful law of life- to replace one's life with a new one."

Now the sky was completely covered with black clouds. Though four hours were still left to sunset, it seemed that darkness wanted to engulf us all before it was time. There were occasional bolts of thunder. I held Vasu's hand and said- "Sweetheart, the rain is about to come. We cannot return

home now so let's climb up the high embankments of Sunanda Sagar." As we began walking a few thick droplets hit us.The air was filled with the constant rumbling of clouds and, as if in its echo, squawking of peacocks ready to mate. Vasu had a blissful expression on her face; she said- "I think nothing penetrates our hearts deeper than nature."

"Nature claims the biggest share of what is beautiful in our lives. Look at these dark clouds, the clear transparent water of Sunanda Sagar stretched like a blanket and these green fields. Roaring thunder is getting mixed up with the squawks of peacocks who are now giving the signal that they are ready to mate and this cool breeze caresses our bodies. Who wouldn't feel captivated with this sight?"

By now the peacock's squawks were drawing nearer. And then we saw it; its wings fully stretched it was performing a dance for its female.

Vasu put her hand on my shoulder and said- "See my love, how beautiful its tails are, and the grace with which it dances."

"And if his female wasn't there probably it would never have stretched its wings and danced like this." I hugged her tight.

She said- "I do not have words to describe how beautiful and enrapturing this present is."

"The dance is an invitation to the female to mate and the squawks are meant to reassure her. The peacock wants her to join him in enjoying the bliss of their present lives while the nature prepares for the coming of the next."

"So do the birds too have hearts like we humans?"

"In some ways yes, my dear. Life has many forms and each one of these forms has its own uniqueness but the basic laws of attaining bliss and genesis are the same for all. This peacock seeks the pleasure of togetherness with her mate now, but his pleasure would not come to an end here; it would give rise to a new life which would prepare for a new dance long after this pair is gone."

"Dear Jai! There is so much to hope for and look forward to if we put our focus on our present lives."

"You are right. We spend too much of our time thinking about death. What is there to see in it?"

"And rebirth?"

"I believe in rebirth and it is very dear to me. Dear Vasu, do you want to believe in an afterlife that is real and tangible or do you seek something that is highly doubtful and unlikely?"

"Who would not prefer real and tangible things to something that is unlikely? But are you saying that we can feel rebirth like tangible phenomena?"

"Of course one can. But the rebirth I am talking about cannot be brought about by a single individual. This peacock couple for instance is preparing for their rebirth."

Vasu looked into my eyes and smiled. I hugged her and asked- "Why did you smile dear?"

"I guess we are going to be reborn too."

I kissed her. Falling rain drops and elation had swelled up my eyes but I squinted my eyes to look at her face. She had never looked as pretty as she was now. Her big watery eyes were expressing a number of emotions all at once. She said- "Two come together to be reborn! A lone person cannot make one's life eternal. Intermingling of two souls leads to the genesis of a new life and they become eternal."

"And such a beautiful genesis. This new life inherits the combined sum total of their qualities- strength, courage, skills all are passed on."

"Everything is preserved."

"It was raining heavily now. Our clothes were drenched, rain drops washing against Vasu's face were making it even more mesmerizing. As the rain fell harder I felt as though I was looking through a pearl studded screen. Her golden brown hair was trapping all the raindrops falling over it, I undid her bun and observed tiny droplets slip over the length of her long hair. I do not remember how long we kept sitting there observing thousands of tiny streams falling into Sunanda Sagar and the green paddy field.

Her wet bodice had clung to her body and each one of her curves was standing out prominently, wet shawl hung heavily from her left shoulder, no longer swaying to the strong wing. I was drinking in her beauty with hungry eyes. I said- "I have never seen you as pretty as you look now. True, your beauty has always created ripples in my heart but today you look different, new as if your beauty has increased a hundredfold."

Vasu ran her fingers over my closely cropped wet hair and said in a voice laden heavily with emotions- "Why, I am the same Vasu."

"Like our world changes every moment, it seems that your beauty too assumes new forms and aspects with each passing moment."

It seems that we kept talking to each other like this for ages, time had come to a standstill for us. Rumbling clouds had completely overwhelmed

the sky and we never realized when the sun set. The rain instead of abating kept growing stronger. When it grew completely dark, we realized that it was time for us to go home.

Nowadays, I would often be absent for months from Agrodka in relation to my work as the commander-in-chief of the republic. We had not crushed Vikramaditya's power but merely bruised his ego and we all knew that an injured leopard becomes many times more dangerous. We were still keeping a close watch on his activities. He was filling up his coffers very fast but at the same time trying to keep his subjects satisfied. Royal highways had been made free from brigandage and inns, wells and ponds were constructed for the well being of travellers and merchants. Shady trees had been planted by their sides and every care was being taken to keep the roads well maintained to make travelling as comfortable as possible. 'He' had issued a variety of gold coins which had attained fame for their high level of purity, better even than the ones that had been coined in the times of Devaputra and Samudragupta. Each one of them was embossed with images replete with symbolism- in some Chandra was seen to be shooting an arrow at a lion, in some the Vamana was himself shown to be holding an umbrella over his head 'and' on the obverse side would be cast images of Lakshmi. To be precise, his coins were serving as a means to promote the imperial propaganda; often they would also carry pithy one liners- "Narendrachandraprathito Divam Jaiyatyajayi Bhuvi Simha Vikramah", "Simha Vikramah", Simha Chandrah", Dev Shrimaharajadhiraj Shrichandraguptah". The success of his efforts was reflected in the fact that one day while passing through a Kuru village, I heard one man say- "Nobody can defeat Vikramaditya. Not just men but even demons, ogres and ghosts seek commands from him. To that village simpletr, the images embossed upon Chandragupta's coins were a living reality, the truth.

We had no fear from the south. Not because we had Malava republic as our neighbour but because we knew that Rudrasimha would not contemplate any misadventure till the time Chandragupta's regime remains strong. We did not have much to fear about' much on our western front either, because our neighbours Devaputrashahis were the vassals of Persian Shahs who were presently grappling with the Hun invaders from the north-west. Though he had grown wary of our increased strength after we defeated Chandragupta, 'the' Kushan Devaputrashahi was well aware that the Kuninda-Arjunayan-Yaudheya alliance had no intention of crossing its present northern boundary across the river Vipash (Beas) and Sutudri (Satluj). Not that Chandragupta did not know that we did not

covet the land beyond Yamuna to our south. But his ambition to conquer the entire land between the two oceans would not let him be at peace with us. His increasing strength wasn't a good news for us and we did not by any means intend to be caught unawares when the invasion came. I would be busy day and night in preparing our troops. That day I was at Khandila supervising the arrow shooting exercise, sword fighting and horse riding practice etc. of some new recruits. In the evening, I sat down with some friends to relax when Madhav arrived in full horse riders' gear and a whip in his hand. He bowed to me and said- "Brother Jai, the news that I bring would make not just you but the entire Yaudheya land happy."

This aroused my curiosity- "What's the good news? Are the Kshtrapas and Vikramaditya fighting? That would be a good news indeed."

"You set your sight too far brother Jai."

"That's the need of the hour Madhav. Every Yaudheya must set his sight as far as possible and try to gauge what the future might have in store for us. Our republic has never faced the kind of danger that it does now. Vikramaditya's resolve to wipe out our name from the pages of history is still firm."

"We have beaten him once, if he still has not lost his resolve then I am sure we can help him lose it once again. But the news that I bring is of a different order. Sister Vasu has given birth to a Yaudheya." As he said this, Madhav got down from his horse and embraced me. After him all my friends present there embraced me one by one and expressed their happiness at hearing the news. I was very happy as well, but for some reason could not find too many words to express myself."

Madhav said- "Brother Jai! The news of a new Yaudheya's arrival always fills our hearts with elation. After all it took efforts of several generations for Yaudheyas to attain their present fame."

"Of course, we must all feel proud of the fact that Yaudheya mothers have given birth to such fearsome warriors through generations. And now, thanks to your efforts, Yaudheya women aren't just mothers of warriors but brave warriors themselves."

Khadila's Puruskrita took my hand in his hand and said- "Jai! I desire my grandson to be named Vijay (victory)." All said in unison- "Yes that's the name we want for him."

Madhav added- "What Jai has done for the republic would forever become a part of the Yaudheya folklore. We expect his son to take our republic to still greater heights, so I think the name 'Vijay' is apt."

I said- "Who am I to defy uncle Puruskrita's orders?"

That night I did not get sleep for very long. I kept thinking about the new birth, 'Isn't it a happy news indeed that now we have one more pair of hands to protect the honour of the Yaudheyas, one day when I grow old and weak, those hands would take over from me and take our dreams ahead.' I was getting impatient for the dawn to arrive so that I could depart for Agrodka.

The distance between Agrodka and Khandila is more than eighty miles. But we rode fast, halting for one night on the way, we reached Agrodka the next day. As soon as I arrived, sister Nanda kissed my dusty-sweaty forehead and said with tears in her eyes- "How happy I am Jai! Now we have one more Yaudheya in our house and he looks just like you."

I put my hand on her shoulder and said- "I am happy too, but tell me how could you discern from a four days' child's face that he would grow up to look like me?"

She smiled and said- "Women can tell such things."

Madhav said- "And cat's do not teach everything they know to tigers. But sister Nanda! Do not lose your cool, this is an old phrase that I am merely repeating." Nanda looked at him and said- "An old phrase indeed! You love to take liberties but don't forget whom you are talking to Madhav."

Then she held my hand and said- "If I am a cat then he is a scared cat. Come you must be tired, eat something first then I will show your son's face to you."

Madhav- "And do you know Nanda, our folks at Khandila have already suggested a name for him.".

Nanda- "Is that so? They already named him! But I thought that privilege was mine."

I- "Of course its yours. At Khandila they suggested the name 'Vijay'. Do you like it?"

Nanda smiled and held both my hands- "Of course I like it, just the kind of name I would have wanted for my son."

She served us the lunch and then brought over a bottle of old wine and some glasses. While he talked to each other and drank outside, the women were singing childbirth songs and dancing inside the house. By now I knew most of the Yaudheya songs by heart but this was the first occasion that I was listening to childbirth songs. And what were those songs like; it was a summary of our centuries old glorious history; one of them for instance was about our brave ancestors who treated the ferocious invader

Rudrakshma with disdain and referred to him as Rudrak. Every Yaudheya woman dream of giving birth to such brave sons. Childbirth celebrations are yet another occasion to recall our history and glory.

I said to Nanda- "Yaudheya men get disproportionate credit for their courage. In my opinion, Yaudheya women have contributed more than men in whatever Yaudheyas have achieved today."

Nanda- "But Jai, us Yaudheya women would never forget what you have done for us. Till you arrived we were Yaudheyas in all but name."

"And you are saying this Nanda. Yaudheya women who have so painstakingly passed on our tradition to our children over generations. They grow up listening to stories of our ancestors' courage, the history of our courage and the tales of our collective pride. We wouldn't have been what we are but for Yaudheya women."

"I agree with you in that, but till now we were Yaudheyas only as Yaudheya men's mothers, sisters and wives. But due to your efforts we may now act as Yaudheyas as a matter of right."

Nanda had said that she would show the child to me the next morning. I got up early and got ready. Nanda said to Revtak- "Reu, look at him and try to learn something, you are a father too."

Revtak- "What have I done now?"

Nanda- "What have you done? When our first child was born, you did not seem half as eager to see him."

I got slightly embarrassed. Nanda noticed it, and said- "It's alright, we all feel eager when our first is born." Then she held my hand and took me inside.

Before I could see my son, my eyes fell on Vasu's face; enraptured by what I saw I couldn't remove them. Her delicate pinkish-lotus face wasn't there anymore, instead I saw a frail figure; simple youthful restlessness and spontaneity had been replaced by the solemnity of motherhood. Her peacock tail like long hair did not shine anymore, now there was shrivelled black mass in its place. Her entire being bore the signs of gifts she had sacrificed to bring a new life into this world. To a casual onlooker she wouldn't have looked very pretty but my eyes could only see a being of unrivalled beauty. I was reminded of how much pain a woman undergoes to experience the bliss of motherhood. As Nanda took the baby in her hand I saw how intently Vasu's big expressive eyes were looking at this part of her. Her gaze reflected pride, there was a shine in those eyes that was contagious. I looked at the delicate small thing Nanda was holding in her

hands; the little thing was shaking. He had small yellow hair on his head and his mother's blue eyes.

His mouth, chins, hands, neck and limbs were so small, so delicate. In twenty years time these would transform into a ferocious Yaudheya warrior. 'Every big project has a small beginning'. I kept staring at the child and Vasu at me. We were communicating the immense pride we felt through this mute language. Our existence would not be wiped out from this world like footsteps on the sand, we would leave our representative behind us.

Nanda said- "See Jai, such a beautiful child! And he looks just like you."

I- "Its a beautiful child indeed, but he looks like you."

Nanda- "Like me! You mean like Vasu! Yes, his hair and eyes resemble Vasu's but his chin and forehead are like yours. And did I not tell you, us women know the art of predicting what a child would turn out to be like after twenty years."

I- "Predict the future! You must be a seer."

Nanda- "Don't trust me but you will see. Vijay's hair-eyes would turn out to be like his mother's and the rest of the body like yours."

Nanda put the child in my hands and Vasu looked at me, she was smiling. Nanda took me out of the room and said- "Isn't it a miracle of nature! Some traits from mother and some from father and a new life comes into being."

I- "Every new life is a miracle. Life is nature's finest creation and the foremost among all forms of life is the human life. But this life isn't created out of nothing Nanda! Both mother and father contribute their portions to the what becomes a new life. And these portions, they contain the thousands of years of physical and mental inheritance passed on through generations—it consists of our values, it's a mould as well as a chisel that shapes what we become. Its beginning is not from nothing, despite being so minute, it contains a universe within it."

Nanda- "Wealth accumulated over thousands of generations."

I- "And how these generations are entwined, my parents' portions, Vasu's parents' portion along with mine and her's. In the very second generation a child carries the contributions of as many as six lives."

Nanda- "Meaning eight lives' portions in the third generation."

I- "So you see Nanda, seemingly Vijay has inherited the traits of just two humans; you feel that his eyes-hair are like his mother's and its body like his father's, but the truth is that no less than four people have contributed to the formation of his physical-mental traits. And if we were to stretch this still further back then this child has inherited the traits of two people from the last generation, four in the third generation, eight in the fourth, sixteen in the fifth and so on. So one can say though this beginning appears humble, its inheritance is huge and its future is still bigger; over generations this inheritance of traits grows so vast that it may be deemed an eternal flow."

Nanda- "Jai! So you are saying there is no afterlife and rebirth? I do not know too much about philosophy but I understand as much that giving birth to a child is like one's own beautiful rebirth."

I- "And also that imaginary notion of rebirth is self-centered and based upon the fear of death personal loss; whereas to understand children's birth as one's own rebirth inspires hope, the spirit of selflessness and let's us transcend narrow self interest. It teaches us to value the lives we have here and now because our progeny would carry forward our traits which would live on in thousands of generations yet to come."

Nanda- "And this new life is so full of hope. When I look at Vijay's eyes I feel that Vasu's eyes have taken a rebirth in new and more lasting form. I think every birth expresses the old physical and mental inheritance in a new form. After All by the time we leave our bodies it grows old and weak; eyesight becomes weak, the body loses its vigour, memory becomes dimmer and the faculty of judgement diminishes. Why do people then still want to cling on to life?"

I - "Yes, the fact that one's being would be lost for forever scares people and they like to imagine that once again they would be reborn and lead happy and prosperous lives."

Nanda- "Then the idea of rebirth is nothing more than a figment of people's imagination?"

I- "It is futile to discuss whether its real or not but there is no doubt about the fact that it is borne out of selfish impulses. Humans do not derive happiness solely out of their personal well being, they get happiness out of the happiness of their loved ones. The idea of rebirth holds out the temptation of merely one's own well being."

Kalidas and Yaudheya

As time passed our prosperity kept on increasing- every village had a number of water bodies and wells for the use of agriculture, cattle and humans. Flood and draught ceased to remain threats for the Yaudheya land. Wheat, barley, many varieties of rice and several other kinds of crops began to grow in the Yaudheya land. We imported high quality sugarcane from north Bengal and planted it in our farms. The yield was so good that soon it began to be said that nectar begins to ooze out from the standing crop at the strike of a bird's beak; now it is true the sugarcane from north Bengal is indeed very good but nectar oozing out at the strike of a bird's beak is definitely an exaggeration. We also imported vine and fig seeds from Gandhar-Kamboj and planted them in our orchards. In the past twenty years, Yaudheya not just increased their military might but also managed to completely transform their cities and villages. Our farms and orchards were examples to be emulated by others and the quality of our cattle improved to the extent that they were much in demand in even distant markets and cattle fairs. Our human resource too improved in the same proportion. Of course, I could not become father to twenty children as Nanda desired but I was blessed with three sons- Vijay, Ripunjay and Sanjay. Vijay was eighteen years old by now and his mental and physical qualities would make any father proud. The other two were eight and twelve years old respectively. Vasu was my lifelong companion and Nanda still cracked jokes like the old times. We had taken meticulous care to improve learning and crafts in the Yaudheya land. We exported rugs, cotton, a variety of textile, ivory, wooden and stone implements and art works to distant lands. By now craftsmen had almost the same status as Yaudheyas, though we still couldn't give them membership of our republican institutions. Slavery had been long abolished. Yaudheyas seemed prosperous and happy in all respects. After the death of commander Bappa, I was elected the Puruskrita and mahamantri of the republic, though I remained a common citizen like the rest of Yaudheyas.

I was of course happy about the increasing prosperity and strength of our republic but whenever I thought of the events that were unfolding across the Yamuna, my mind could not but feel agitated. In the east, Chandra Gupta had managed to annex the entire stretch up to Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) and the eastern sea. And the amazing statesmanship he had displayed in taking over the Vakataka kingdom on the western coast astounded me. Prithvi Sena did not submit to Chandra Gupta till his end. Vakatakas controlled the entire stretch of land from the east coast to west

coast between the two rivers Krishna and Narmada. They still commanded a formidable army and we would that the two tyrants clash and finish each other off in a war to their hope mutual ends; that would have been a happy situation in terms of the safety of the Yaudheya land. Chandra Gupta had a daughter, Prabhavati by name, from his second queen Kuber Naga. It seems to me now that daughters inherit most of the unpleasant aspects of their fathers' character. It is said that Prabhavati is an incarnation of Saraswati herself born in the house of Guptas. It is hard to tell to what extent this rumour is true but from what I have heard, it is certain that she is a very clever and headstrong young woman. She was married to Prithvi Sena's son Rudra Sena who within a span of a few years accepted the suzerainty of Chandra Gupta. Thanks to Prabhavati's influence over him, now the entire Vakataka army has become Chandra Gupta's army.

Malavas too have humbly submitted to the Guptas. Father-son Jai Verma and Simha Verma always thought of the Malava republic as their private property. Malavas had gone complacent and now Jai Verma's grandson Nara Verma has sold the independence of the republic into the hands of Chandra Gupta. What a barefaced traitor he is! Shame! Shame on him! Chandra Gupta is now bestowing imperial titles upon him; republican institutions have been dissolved and Nara Verma declared ruler. Traitor Nara Verma is under the illusion that his dynasty would rule Malavas forever. When I got the news of Nara Verma's treason, I would not get sleep for many nights, somehow I felt that this was as much a defeat for us as it was for Malavas. I would say to my friends "Chandra Gupta has taken his revenge from us without shedding a single drop of blood."

Mahakshtrapa's position had become even worse. He was already surrounded by Chandra Gupta and Prabhavati's husband from east and south; with Nara Verma's treason Malavas in the north too passed under the control of Chandra Gupta. So now Mahakshtrapa found himself hemmed in from three sides. I knew that what Chandra Gupta wanted the most at the moment was control over Avantilat and Saurashtra because he wanted to control the entire western seaboard and its prosperous trade. Both these areas lied within the Mahakstrapa's domain but one could still not be certain that he would not chose to attack us first; so my apprehension about the impending invasion of the Yaudheya land was quite natural.

I was under no illusions about the fact that the armed might and financial resources at the disposal of Chandra Gupta were far in excess of what his father ever had. And I also knew that he was a far better

statesman, more clever and brutal. He used his army only as a last resort when all other tactics failed. By using his daughter to annex Vakatakas' kingdom he had demonstrated the extent to which he was prepared to go. He was also very dexterous at using different kinds of propaganda devices to win the veneration and loyalty of his subjects. He has constructed numerous temples which have been embellished with exceptional specimens of art and architecture; artists, painters and sculptors from far and wide were invited to create these awe inspiring exhibits and were in return compensated most generously. While his devout subjects worshipped him as Dharmaraja (devout emperor), artists heaped praise upon him for being a connoisseur of art. He has taken special care to plant countless stories and myths about himself, his encounter with Baital (demon) being only one among them. His naive subjects look upon their emperor as nothing less than an incarnation who has descended from the heaven to rescue humanity from its throes. Chandra calls himself Param Vaishnav (supreme devotee of Vishnu) and he also wants to convince his subjects that he is in fact Bhuvaraha (boar incarnation of the god Vishnu) who has descended from the heaven to rid the earth from the scourge of mlechcha invaders. I have myself seen one of his Varaha temples at Mathura. The face of the idol is that of a boar and rest of the body is that of a muscular man. I was also astonished to see the image of earth dangling from the boar's teeth. The earth's image was the same as Dhruva Devi. Now as an artist I must admit that the idol was very well done, but why did Chandra Gupta have to dangle his wife's idol from the teeth of the boar? I hadn't imagined that he would go so far. Yes it is true that he rescued her from the clutches of Kushana Devaputra. It is also true that if he hadn't shown courage at a crucial moment probably the Gupta dynasty would have perished. But only Chandra Gupta could have the gall to represent his personal achievements as act an equivalent to rescuing the entire earth. This is how those who know the story of Dhruva Devi would comprehend this idol. Those who do not know the story would praise the king for being dedicated to the god and those who love art would sing glory to the king for being a patron of arts.

Nineteen years had passed since our first victory. During this period we had been increasing our military capacity constantly but instead of subsiding our fears had gone on increasing. Every Yaudheya, men-women, children-old had been silently preparing for the final showdown with Chandra Gupta. Chandra Gupta kept himself informed about our activities and he would often regret that when his plan had worked out so smoothly with Vakatakas, how did he fail to lure his own childhood mate and uncle

Jai. Dhruva Devi sent me numerous letters and also professions of love on behalf of her still unmarried sister. But after the first war I had stopped replying to her letters. Dhruva Devi even sent a messenger to express her desire to see ajjuka's land of birth. Probably she genuinely believed that if she met me, she would be able to convince me. I was scared that she might actually turn up. Not that I had any doubts about her charm working upon me but I did not want unnecessary trouble. I kept postponing her visit through one excuse or the other. Chandra Gupta too kept pursuing me all through these nineteen years. Not just the lure of a high office in the imperial bureaucracy but he even went to the extent of offering me the crown of Yaudheya lands. 'His desire was to transform his mother's family too into a powerful dynasty like Vakatakas', he would say.

The monsoons were over, though there was no mud on the grounds anymore, they were still covered with fresh green grass. Our golden paddy fields were swaying with the gentle breeze. I, Revtak and Vasunanda were taking a walk one evening by the fields when we saw two travellers pass by, one of them was riding a horse and the other one walking on foot seemed to be his attendant. The man riding the horse came near us and asked me- "Arya! Can you tell me which one is supreme commander Jai Yaudheya's house."

I looked at him—he might have been around thirty-thirty five years of age. His face reflected civility and cultivation but I was most attracted towards the shine in his eyes—there was a scholarly aura about him. Apart from a white cloak, a white warm cloth (ushniya) and a white antar vasak he had no ornaments on his body. I asked politely- "Arya! Where are you coming from?"

"I am coming from Mathura. Supreme commander Jai is an eminent scholar and a master artist; yours truly is also an artist, albeit a humble one. This brahmin has travelled all the way from the distant southern city of Avantipur in the hope of catching a glimpse of him."

I folded both my hands and said- "Arya! Accept my salutations! This trivial Yaudheya too fancies himself to be an aesthete. But it seems that you have been deliberately misled by someone. That he is a warrior is something we all know of but insofar as I know he has nothing to do with art.

At this the traveller now assuming a somewhat farcical tone said- "Arya! Probably you do not know about him. I have heard of him from very reliable sources and I have no doubts regarding the veracity of what

I have been told. I would be highly obliged if you could kindly guide me to the supreme commander's house."

While we were having this conversation it was getting extremely difficult for Revtak and Vasunanda to conceal their laughter. I replied- "Arya! I do not know what to say, you seem convinced. Though he is the great lord of our land, unfortunately he does not have a house of his own."

The traveller expressed surprise and said- "Where does the supreme commander reside then? I have heard that Agrodka is his abode."

"What you have heard is true. Agrodka is his birth land, all his brother-sisters live here. But he is a nomad, he keeps roaming from the house of one friend to that of another."

The travellers, now getting slightly dispirited said- "I hope he is present here at Agrodka at the moment."

"I am extremely sorry Arya but he isn't present at Agrodka at the moment. He has gone on a tour and it is difficult to tell when he would return."

"I would not go back without meeting him, wherever he has gone, I will seek him out."

"That, I am afraid is going to be a daunting task. On one occasion I needed to meet him for some purpose and I had to follow him around for almost twenty days. Whichever village I reached, I would be told that he had already moved ahead. The man is known to travel almost a hundred miles in a day."

The traveller now growing despondent somehow mumbled out- "But I am still meeting him."

"Arya! It is already dark now. Even if you want to go after him, you cannot travel any further now. Why not oblige me by accepting my hospitality for the night?"

The traveller feeling somewhat relieved and happy accepted my invitation. We reached Revtak's house with him. I had really given away my ancestral house to the field workers who worked at the collective farm and now I lived at Revtak's house. We prepared the best room in the ho[illegible] for him, got his feet washed with hot water and served him honey d[illegible] water and fruits. All I had been able to learn about him yet [illegible] of being born was a brahmin artist from Avantipur. Mostly I t[illegible] with painting and sculpture but before we sett[illegible] Mahakshtrapas that city's he told us that he was an aspiring poe[illegible] manifolds."

out a poetry about the beauty of an inebriated young woman. I asked him- "Arya! Can I offer you a drink?

The visitor- "Of course yes Arya! No true poet could say no to alcohol. As for me, apart from being a poet I am also a devotee of goddess Kali."

By now I had become certain that I was talking to none other than the legendary poet Kalidas but I did not want to reveal my identity as yet."

We were all very pleased to know that the stranger we were hosting was Kalidas himself. His poetry was well known and much appreciated in the Yaudheya land; young men would recite stanzas from 'Meghaduta.' I had liked it too but somewhat resented the fact that while describing the journey of the cloud (Megha) to Alkapuri, the poet had chosen not to make any mention of the Yaudheya land which fell in the way. After dinner we started a round of drinks, as the poet got somewhat drunk in a while I asked him- "Kaviraj (great poet)...!

Kalidas- "Please do not call me Kaviraj."

I – "But you deserve this title Arya! Yaudheyas love your creations."

Kalidas- "I am very grateful to Yaudheyas for their generosity but pray tell what have I done so far to deserve this title? Where do I stand in comparison to Ashvaghosha, Saumilla and Bhasa?"

I- "Trust me Kaviraj, we are not saying this to flatter you. Your 'Meghadoot' is sung in every household. That small epic itself is proof enough for us that you are in fact a great poet. Kaviraj, on the way to Alka, the cloud would have to pass Yaudheya land as well, why did you leave out its mention in your epic?"

Kalidas- "Because I had never seen Yaudheya land; only now when I am here do I realize how beautiful your country is."

Upon realizing that I was a connoisseur, Kalidasa narrated several of his poems. I too played some songs for him on my veena. Our hospitality as well as our love for art seemed to satisfy him immensely. When he broached the topic of departing the next day to meet commander-in-chief, we managed to convince him that the way ahead was very treacherous yo[illegible]d, therefore, he must rest for a day or two more."

some[illegible]

art. [illegible]hosted him at Agrodka for a full week. Yaudheyas showered so [illegible]d respect upon him that one day he conceded- "Neither the

At this the tra[illegible]e Mahakshtrapa nor the palatial mansions gifted by "Arya! Probably you do n[illegible]he genuine heartfelt appreciation and respect very reliable sources and I have [illegible]d to this humble poet."

We organized numerous singing-dancing festivals in his honour. Young men and women competed with each other to sing their newly composed songs to the mahakavi. All this while I broached no other topic than art-literature with him; though I did try to convince him to give up the thought of meeting the commander-in-chief. But since he remained firm on his desire, one day during the evening drinking session I finally told him- "I beg your pardon mahakavi for hiding my identity all this while. I am the commander-in-chief Jai Yaudheya you have come to meet."

Kalidasa stared at me, apparently amazed. Then he held out both his hands and embraced me. For very long he kept holding my hands gaping at me wide eyed and then he said-

"Friend Jai! I beg your pardon, supreme commander Jai..."

I- "No, I prefer to be called friend Jai, it would be an honour for me to be referred to as a friend by the mahakavi."

Kalidasa- "Ok, friend Jai! I am in fact a messenger sent by your enemy Vikramaditya. But now it is difficult for me to decide whether I am Vikramaditya's messenger or yours. Without doubt I have been won over by the Yaudheya people to their side. I am highly doubtful as to whether people could lead happier lives anywhere else outside the Yaudheya land. Neither would I have believed that it is possible for common folks to display such spontaneity and self respect had I not seen it for myself. Friend! You knew since day one about who I am, and yet I do not think that these seven days all these people could have been play-acting to impress me. I believe it firmly that whatever I have seen here is for real. this is how Yaudheya people lead their lives. Let me reserve my poet's tribute to the Yaudheya way of life for some other occasion. If you aren't drunk yet, let me spell out the purpose for which I have been sent here."

I –"I am not drunk Kaviraj, please state the purpose of your visit without hesitation."

Kalidasa- "Your affection and warmth has already rid me of all hesitation. If I end up saying something offensive please do not mind, just keep in your mind that these are Vikramaditya's words that I utter."

I-"Has Chandragupta sent you? But aren't you from Ujjayini...?"

Kalidasa- "Yes, it is true that I have had the good fortune of being born in the Mahakal's city.

"And I have heard that under the aegis of Mahakshtrapas that city's wealth, learning and art have prospered manifolds."

Kalidasa-"Indeed that is also true! Apart from a hundred-hundred and twenty five years when Pradyot and his descendants ruled the city, perhaps at no other time the fortunes of this city have risen as much as they do now, under the reign of the Mahakshtrapas."

I-"And if I am not wrong, like his ancestor, great Rudradaman, the present Mahakshtrapa and his son too are ardent devotees of Saraswati (the goddess of learning)."

Kalidasa-"Love for learning flows in the veins of Mahakshtrapas."

I-"In that case Mahakavi! What made you leave your city of birth and seek patronage at Patliputra?"

Kalidasa-"Patliputra gave me fame. But my friend, perhaps you are unaware that nowadays the emperor spends most of his time at the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna."

I-"Why did he choose to make the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna his new abode?"

Kalidasa-" I have already composed a poem about that city 'Tanutyajan na shariram bandha'."

I-"I have read it, but surely Parambhattaraka does not reside there in the hope of giving up his mortal frame and attaining Nirvana?"

Kalidasa-"My friend! You know Parambhattarak better than I do."

I-"I did, once upon a time, but that was ages ago."

Kalidasa-"Yes it is true that you knew him a very long time ago but he was already a young man by the time you left him. Past that age very few people are able to change themselves."

I-"Yes Mahakavi, probably you are right. When I left him he was a young man of twenty and when I met him again after many years, I noticed that he hadn't changed much. But I want to know what made you leave Ujjayini."

Kalidasa-"Ujjayini is my birthplace. I grew up there, studied there, in fact whatever gifts I have today were bestowed upon me by that generous city. And the Kstrapas helped me along at every step, lavishing praises upon me even at the time when I was merely a nervous stuttering young man. I was a shy hesitating lad, but whatever I composed was granted recognition beyond its true worth. And finally, when I composed 'Meghadootam', Mahakshtrapa Rudrasimha summoned me to his court and asked the ablest singer in the court to sing it. At the end of the rendition he got so overwhelmed that he asked me in a choking voice- "Young poet!

Are you really cursed? Is someone really hindering you from meeting your loved one?" I said-"No dear king! This is merely a poet's imagination." Mahakshtrapa smiled and said-"Perhaps you hesitate in asking for your prize, mere imagination cannot be so vivid and emotive. I am certain that these verses emanate from the depths of a tormented soul. Kstrapas have always prided themselves for being humble connoisseurs of true art. If it is the love for some Kshtrapa princess that rends your heart like this, then speak up without hesitation, there's nothing that us Kshtrapas wouldn't do for a great artist like you." I think you can guess what sort of feelings Mahakshtrapa's humility and generosity would have evoked in my heart; and this at a time when my songs were as yet unheard beyond the banks of Shipra."

I-"Yes Mahakavi! This is why when I heard that you had arrived as a messenger; I thought Mahakshatrapa Rudrasimha had sent you."

Kalidasa-"Had it been so then probably neither would my heart have been so heavy nor yours."

I-"But that is true. Both Yaudheyas and Mahakshtrapas are threatened by the same enemy."

Kalidasa-"Alas! I have not arrived as a messenger from the city of my birth. Let me tell you something about myself before I discharge my duties as the messenger of Vikramaditya. Whatever I wrote after 'Meghadoot' was met with exuberant applauses from the people of Ujjayini and Avanti. Along with fame I attained opulence, in excessive measure. I wasn't in fact in love with any Kshtrapa princess at the time of composing 'Meghadootam' but now I just needed to drop a slight hint and numerous Shaka beauties would flock to me. Along with my skills with the pen, providence had also endowed me with the gift of youth, and I dare say beauty in a small measure."

I-"Not in a small measure Mahakavi; a lot of it."

Kalidasa-"Avanti gave me recognition, respect and wealth. But I could not resist my predilection for excessive indulgence. Had this indulgence been merely for one's own self then maybe I could have rescued myself. But my friend Jai, you must have heard that Avanti is a veritable goldmine of seraphic beauties. Ah! The beauty of those Shaka, Greek and Abhiran damsels, to draw a sketch of which this poet had to perpetually whet his pen and device ever new inventory of phrases. Their buttery white cheeks with a modicum of reddish glow over them, their perfectly formed, luscious, naturally pink lips...how many women could I have written about; such angelic beauties that even a faithful depiction of their natural beauty

sounded like metaphorical verse. And, if deep enticing eyes cravingly stare at you, those passionate petal lips await your touch with sweet anticipation... what could save this humble poet? I was never a self abnegating yogi, in fact I do not believe that such self abnegating yogis exist in the real world, most of it is deceit and hypocrisy. I let myself plunge in a boundless ocean of love and let my heart gulp nectar from it for years. And then, I do not exactly remember since when, its brilliance began to dim and its charm began to wane. What was once an intoxicating drink, due to excessive indulgence, had turned into a dull fluid for me. I do not know how you would judge me, but let me accept that not exercising an iota of restraint sapped passion out of my life. Love, in the honour of which I compose such ardent songs, is no longer present in my life."

I-"Such excessive indulgence in love...! Could there have been any other outcome of this obsessive passion?"

Kalidasa-"I still drink alcohol but it no longer intoxicates me in the same manner. I still seek the company of women but it too has lost its charm for me. In fact now, neither can I drink the same wine twice nor can I be with the same woman for too long. Love that I cannot attain in the real life, I try to create in my imagination. So you see Jai, Avantipur's wine and women were easily accessible to me. Though kings and emperors too enjoy these comforts but they attain them through the use of force. Force can never attract in the same manner as love does, and my attraction was based on love. And I did not seek bliss just for myself but also took care to give back it in an equal measure. I began to hear tales about how Kalidasa's verses mingle with the currents of rivers flowing in the north, east and west, his songs reverberate from the snow capped mountains of the Himalayas to the length and breadth of the vast land of Bharat. Then I became aware of something more enticing than love itself- and when I say of 'love', I mean it in a very broad sense. I began to realize that even a hundredth portion of my fame was enough for me to secure all the love that I could ever desire. As I began to become aware of the colossal breadth of my fame, the thought of making it eternal began to vex me."

I-"But why did this thought vex you? Did you have to make an effort to attain fame? You had a natural gift, whosoever heard your songs, preserved them in their hearts; from heart to heart it spread through the realm like a forest fire. Why did you feel the need to make an effort to make your fame eternal?"

Kalidasa stopped at this point and excused himself for the night. We decided to continue the rest of the conversation the next day.

Though it was quite late by the time I lay down on my bed, my thoughts kept going back to the conversation with Kalidasa. Without doubt he possessed a sharp intellect and his heart was free from malice. He was a lover of beauty but seemed incapable of harbouring vicious lust in his heart. Though he was afflicted by several flaws of character somehow I did not think that he could be held accountable as an individual for bearing them."

The next day I took the poet to a garden outside Agrodka. We settled down underneath shady trees, on lush green grass by the bank of Pushkarini. Kalidasa looked around and said- "There are plenty of devices here worthy of being captured into a song. I want to make many new experiments; friend Jai quite often I feel dissatisfied with my own efforts."

I-"Mahakavi there is no need for you to feel dissatisfied with your work. Have you observed the scars of the moon? Do they diminish its beauty or enhance it? The same is true of your verses. Your small errors increase the charm of your songs."

Kalidasa-"You are generous Jai. Anyway, let me finish what I was saying yesterday. You are right; fame came easily to me without effort. But I would think, there have been so many great poets before our time. Some of their works are extant but many have been lost too. I am not ready to believe that apart from five-seven great poets like Valmiki, Ashvaghosha, Matrichet, Bhasa and Saumilla whom we hear about there have been no other big names. What if my poems were lost too? There was a time when people did not write, our ancient sages collected the various scattered verses into books called the Vedas, which were then memorized and passed on through the word of mouth. I decided not to risk the fate of my poems on feeble and shaky collective memory and I started writing them down on birch leaves. These are now being sent to all corners of this vast land. But even this isn't enough to save my verses from getting lost into oblivion. Vyas's Mahabharata and Valmiki's Ramayana could not have become so popular had brahman's not adopted them as their own. My own creations may never be adopted by them because they are modern, though I am under no illusion that my poet ancestors of the bygone ages were anymore virtuous than I am. Since brahmans would not adopt my epics, I decided to seek patronage from the kings."

"But kings and their empires do not last for an eternity either!"

"Dear Jai, do not think that I am enamoured by Vikramaditya or that I am going to write epics about the glory of the Guptas."

"In that case Mahakavi! Why would Vikramaditya be interested in ensuring that your poems become immortal."

"I will convince him through the use of allegory. I am writing an epic called Raghuvansha. I have told Vikramaditya that my character Dilip is none else but his grandfather Chandragupta and Sudakshina is his grandmother Kumaradevi; that I would immortalize his late father, the all conquering emperor Samudragupta by the name Raghu and the character Az is he himself."

"And being told as much would be enough to arouse his interest?"

"One convenient aspect of writing epics is that there is a lot of room for exaggeration. I have portrayed the emperor as being completely devoid of selfish interests. Listen to this verse-

"Prajanamev Bhutyartha sa Tabhyo Balimagrahit.

Sahastragunamustrashtumadatte hi rasam ravi."

I laughed and said- "Mahakavi! Isn't this a lie? Do you really believe that emperors tax their subjects for their own welfare? The emperor, his numerous wives, princes and princesses, all of them maintain huge palaces. Do they exist for the welfare of the subjects? And who pays for it? You say 'Just as the sun saps a little bit of our water and gives us back a thousand fold in return.' Isn't it true that all the wealth that the emperor spends comes from the subjects themselves? How could he give 'a thousand times more than what he takes', unless he owns trees that yield gold coins."

Kalidasa- "Of course it is a lie. But I believe that if one is to lie, one should lie grandly; and I am not the first one to do so. I would only be treading the path shown by the grand poet-sages of the past like Valmiki and Vyas. Jai, you know Vikramaditya very well, he is by no means a simpleton."

I- "Of course he isn't. He could give both Kautilya and Chandragupta Maurya a run for their money."

Kalidasa- "He loves my compositions. Once I composed a verse called 'Bhuvam Mahavaraha-Danshtrayam'. Upon hearing it Vikaramaditya got so excited that he immediately ordered it to be engraved upon a stone pillar. But first he got carved from a skilled Mathur sculptor a majestic idol of the Mahavaraha (Vishnu's boar incarnation) which he took me along to observe and appreciate. My friend; you have spent a lot of time with the royalty and I am sure you are no stranger to how low they can sink; though despite myself, I was really surprised then to learn what Vikramaditya was upto. Though the Varah idol was supposed to be his

own representation, its head was not Vikramaditya's; but the idol of Bhudevi(earth goddess) had Dhruvadevi's face."

I laughed and said- "I have seen an idol similar to the one you describe at Mathura."

Kalidasa- "You did! So there's one at Mathura as well. My friend, that day I had lied about having arrived from Mathura, in fact I have never been there. But speaking about the idol, I am sure that similar thoughts must have crossed your mind as mine upon seeing it. But Vikramaditya likes such things, he feels its good propaganda. I feel relieved that he does not ask me to write anything with him as the protagonist, which allows me to pretend that my compositions aren't actually about him; I dread to think what I would have to go through if he made such a request. Through my songs I pay tribute to the immortal aesthetics and those deepest emotions that would keep captivating the esthetics of humankind, so long as it exist. But it is also true that along with it I sing such paeans in the praise of kingship that not just the Guptas but every dynasty to follow would want to preserve them."

I- "But Mahakshtrapa could have done this as well."

Kalidasa- "I am sorry but I beg to differ. Kshtrapa are a mere shadow of their past grandeur. Though unlike the brahmins dependent upon their rival kings for patronage, I do not look down upon Kshtrapas. In my opinion they are in no manner inferior to their rival dynasties likes Guptas, Pallavas and Vakatakas. They too respect brahmins and patronise learning. Kshtrapas look upon themselves as sons of this same holy land of Bharata and strive to protect the Dharma. I don't think it's just to call them foreigner mlechchhs. I have often heard Vikramaditya say such things about them but he is wrong; Kshtrapas have been ruling over this land for a very long time and I hardly know of any dynasty that could survive for more than a century or two."

I- "And the Kshtrapas have been around for more than three centuries now."

Kalidasa- "A setting sun looks the same as the rising sun but it is towards the former that a person looks upon with hope."

I- "And you chose Guptas' rising sun over Kshtrapas whose fortunes are on the wane."

Kalidasa- "But I see radiating from the rising sun of Guptas' fortunes not just the grandeur of an ascendent empire but also the glimmer of a new religion; a religion which need not remain the preserve of a few

knowledgeable persons; a new belief system which has the capacity to draw in the devotion of the masses."

I- "You mean cow worship, ostentatious temples, superstitions, naive stories-Puranas etc."

Kalidasa- "I beg your pardon my friend but I think the power of brahmins would consolidate once again in the near future. I saw an idol of Buddha in your house; it is my belief that he would not be left with too many followers within a span of a few centuries."

I- "I agree with you. Buddha's religion was meant to be Bahujanahitya (for the well being of the masses) but Buddhists chose to seek the patronage of kings. When the Greeks, Kushanas and Shakas arrived in this country, Buddhists welcomed them with open arms whereas brahmins scoffed at them for being foreigners-mlechchhs. Buddhists proved incapable of putting an end to the varna-caste order, neither was it within their power to grant the newcomers a high status within the existing varna order."

Kalidasa- "Brahmins on the other hand corrected their mistake and used their social sanction to accord the high status of kshtriyas to the newcomers. Are you aware how devoted the Devaputrashahis and Mahakshtrapas are to the brahmins today? This is the reason why this poet is hopeful that this newly emergent dispensation of the brahmins would provide the social and political basis for the preservation of his works for a very long time. Kshtrapas cannot do it, Vakatakas too are a declining force now. Though Prithvisena did try to revive the fortunes of this dynasty, Vikramaditya managed to enslave his son Rudrasena on the sly by marrying his daughter to him. Now the reign of that empire is in the hands of Prabhavati, meaning that for all practical purposes Vikramaditya rules over it."

I- "Mahakavi, I am sad to hear that you did not have faith in your compositions. I think you are mistaken, your epics are capable of achieving immortality in their own right."

Kalidasa- "It is possible that I am wrong but the matter of fact is that I have already chosen my side out of my desire for lavish imperial patronage and the anticipation of an immortal legacy. And it is as Vikramaditya's emissary that I stand here today."

Somewhat amused I said- "I already know this."

Kalidasa- "But now that I have met you and understood you, I find myself at a loss for arguments in favour of what I have been sent to propose. What inducements could Vikramaditya possibly offer you when you refuse

to claim even a house for yourself despite being the supreme commander of the Yaudheyas. Could I hope to lure you by saying that Vikramaditya is ready to gift you not just the Yaudheya and Malava land but also Avanti and Saurashtra which are to be conquered in the near future? I already know what your answer would be."

I- "In vain does Vikramaditya hope that I would turn out to be another Malavaraj and sell off the independence of our republic."

Kalidasa- "Exactly the answer that I was expecting, but let me inform you- Vikramaditya intends to unify the entire Bharat under a single authority."

I- "And he supposedly wants to do this to establish dharma (religion), out of beneficence for his beloved subjects, to establish everlasting peace and to protect the realm from foreign invasions. Chandragupta and Kautilya harboured similar thoughts."

Kalidasa- "And they did not succeed. Isn't this what you want to say Jai? Do you know what Chandra thinks? He feels that they could not succeed because the republics had not been crushed once and for all.":

I- "Republics have always been an eyesore for the ambitions of despotic kings. Now there aren't too many of them left either. Malavas have already succumbed to him. Now he eyes Yaudheyas and his army of brahmins and poets are already prepared for him to annihilate them so that they can wipe out our names from the pages of history through their heinous silence."

Kalidasa- "Possibly you are right. Vikramaditya is aware that annihilating Yaudheyas would not be a cakewalk."

I- "And he is right. He would never meet a more fearsome enemy in the battlefield than us."

Kalidasa- "And what would be the outcome?"

I- "We would all die one by one."

Kalidasa- "Can't you see that he is capable of converting this beautiful land into a vast cemetery?"

I- "It is possible, but so long as we are alive, we would never allow him to destroy our republic and way of life."

Kalidasa- "The brave would always command awe and respect, nobody can deny this. But, Vikramaditya is capable of mobilizing the manpower of the entire realm from Yamuna to Lauhitya and Himalaya to Krishnavenya (Krishna). Would Yaudheyas be able to hold out against this overwhelming force?"

I- "Would it be wise to lay down our weapons without even meeting the enemy in the battlefield, particularly when the very existence of our republic is at stake? We do not desire this bloodshed. Tell Vikramaditya that we are still ready to honour the terms that his father Samudragupta had given to us."

Kalidasa- "In vain do they refer to Vikramaditya as 'destroyer of kings.' If you ask me, I would say that his real title ought to be 'destroyer of republics'. He has taken a vow to destroy all the republics. In his view, till the time republics exist, Bharat would remain disunited and its true strength would never be harnessed."

I- "Meaning that at one gesture of the emperor lakhs of soldiers would charge into the battlefield to get themselves slaughtered. Perhaps he thinks that by thus converting his subjects into herds of sheep he would be able to mobilize millions strong armies against foreign invaders. But he cannot see the other aspect of the problem. The day his empire crumbles, there would be dozens of kings, each one of them with their own herds of sheeps. And these sheep soldiers would fall upon each other at the command of their lords without thinking on their own about what is right or wrong. Would Bharat be stronger or weaker in that scenario?"

Kalidasa- "Without doubt it would be weaker."

I- "Republican soldiers may never behave like sheep. Through centuries our fighters have forced our enemies to concede that we make fierce and brave soldiers. But along with being brave warriors, they are also thinking citizens of this independent republic. What do you think might happen if I, their Puruskrita and commander-in-chief tried to treat them like a herd of sheep and asked them to submit to Vikramaditya?"

Kalidasa- "I think they would turn against you as well."

I- "Chandragupta dreams of making the nation strong by turning all its people into sheep whereas my dream is to strengthen the nation by turning our people into thinking and wise warriors."

Kalidasa- "But Jai, this is only possible if the entire nation turns into a republic. Haven't you seen how Malavas' republic succumbed to the Guptas."

I- "So does that mean that I should facilitate the same fate for Yaudheyas as well? I will never let this country become a nation of sheep. If this were to happen then our people would be doomed to be preyed upon by a handful of vultures forever or pass into the hands of predatory foreigners through the betrayal of these vultures."

Kalidasa- "So you desire that the whole of Bharat be ruled by the Yaudheyas?"

I- "No, Yaudheyas do not desire to enslave other people. Our republic was formed through the alliance of Kunindas, Yaudheyas and Arjunayans all three of which are free and willing allies. I desire to constitute the whole of Bharat into a federation of similar free republics."

Kalidasa- "It sounds like a wild dream."

I- "A dream it may be, but it is better than the emperors' self centered vision for our land. This world has come a long way since the time of Vishwamitra, Bharadwaj and Vashishtha who knows what the future has in store for us."

Kalidasa- "Of course the world keeps changing constantly."

I- "And I am hopeful that someday my dream would come true."

My reply disappointed Kalidasa but he parted with a lot of respect and love for the Yaudheya people. I am hopeful that he would use at least part of his talent to write about us Yaudheyas, but I am afraid that his intuition might prove to be true and those portions of his compositions would be lost to the posterity."

The End

Jai did not live to write the rest of the story; though there was still a lot to write about. This had to be done by a heartbroken Madhav Sen.

After Kalidasa's departure Jai had understood that Vikramaditya's invasion would not be too long in coming, so Yaudheya's began preparing for a war to the end. If Yaudheyas had fought this war beyond the Gupta borders; had their war not been purely defensive but offensive in nature then may be the outcome could have been different; but Yaudheya's did not covet others' lands neither did they think it just to inflict pain upon hapless subjects of the Gupta empire. Till the end their strategy and tactics remained honest and free from guile. I had remained Jai's constant companion since our first meeting at Ujjayini and only death could break our bond. I was present at Rohitki when addressing a huge gathering of Yaudheyas Jai said-

"My dear Yaudheya men and women, brace yourselves for a war to the end. Yaudheya women! Remember that you aren't just mothers, sisters and daughters. You aren't just producers of brave Yaudheya men, but you

are Yaudheya warriors yourselves. Perhaps at no point in our long history, did we have to face a danger as grave as the present one. Enemies and conquerors have demanded our submission, but none insisted that we must give up our way of life. Chandragupta is willing to spare our lives only on the condition that we give up our Yaudheya beliefs, our cherished institutions and the name Yaudheya. It is needless to say that if the name Yaudheya, and our age old beliefs are to die, then we too would be as good as dead. We know that we are faced with a mighty enemy, he has gathered manpower and wealth of half of the subcontinent to fight us. But have Yaudheyas ever cared for the odds? We defeated Chandragupta once. Perhaps that memory has begun to fade in his mind, so let us take a pledge today to refresh it for him! And this time our women too would have the full right to bear weapons alongside men. Sunanda showed you the way, fortunately for us, today there are many more Sunandas, there is a Sunanada in every house, not just the Yaudheya women but Kuninda women and the Arjunayan women too have become Sunandas. To exhort Yaudheyas to be brave on the battlefield is to humiliate their sense of duty and honour."

We had been preparing for this war for no less than twenty years. It was the 80th year of the Guptas' calendar (380 AD). Fifty years old by now, this was to be the last occasion for Jai to wield his weapons. He realized that Vikramaditya would not repeat the mistake of making a dash for Agrodka. We would be attacked simultaneously from the north and west and Malava's subjugation to the Gupta's had created a threat from south as well.

I have neither the will nor the desire to give a detailed description of the war that followed. We had built fortresses on our eastern and southern borders. Most of our army consisted of cavalry and infantry, whereas Guptas had a huge number of elephants and chariots. First attack came from the direction of Strughan (Ambala) but we managed to thwart their attempts to cross the Yamuna. This was followed by a series of attempts to cross the river at other locations but each time we managed to repulse them. Finally they managed to push through a fleet upstream by the right bank of the river, near Mathura. In retrospect I feel that this was the turning point of the war, if Mathura wasn't in their hands the outcome could have been different. Though Jai was the supreme commander of our entire army, he understood the significance of the Mathura front and was supervising its defence personally. He managed to stall the progress of the Gupta army for over a month. Chandragupta was himself supervising the battle from Mathura. He ordered his commanders to proceed without caring in the

least about the losses. As they pressed ahead, the imperial army incurred very heavy losses but our own position was shaken too and we were forced to mobilize troops from other fronts to bolster our defences at Mathura. After two and half months of heavy fighting the Guptas managed to land their entire army on the Yamuna bank and enter the Arjunayan lands. Yaudheyas were fighting for every inch of the land. When two more Gupta armies threatened to surround Jai's army from the west and south, he was forced to pull his front behind.

Guptas inflicted a heavy defeat upon Yaudheyas near Indraprastha. Their biggest loss was the capture and death of their commander-in-chief Jai. Vikramaditya had ordered his commanders that Jai should be captured alive and in fact they did manage to capture him. But this could be done only after our commander-in-chief fell on the battlefield after receiving a number of fatal wounds. Yaudheya fighters attacked again and again to take back their commander-in-chief but the imperial army had built a veritable human fortress around him. By the time Virasena came and bowed to introduce himself, all Jai could say is- 'You cannot take me out of the Yaudheya land alive.' Virasena arranged for the best imperial doctors but within a few minutes Jai passed away.

Despite the loss of their commander-in-chief, as Jai would so fondly say, Yaudheya soldiers were not a herd of sheep dependent upon a guide. They fought for every river, forest, stream, hill and village. Men and women both fought with equal tenacity. Now there was no front or battlefield, in fact the whole of Yaudheya land had transformed into a battlefield. Vikramaditya soon managed to capture bigger cities like Agrodka, Rohitki, Khandela and Prithudaka. Every captured man-civilian or soldier was slaughtered by the Gupta army. Yaudheya fighters hid themselves in forests and continued to wage a guerrilla warfare. For the first ten years Guptas barely controlled any lands beyond the bigger cities and the main highways. Even the border highways weren't securely under their control. The imperial army and officials lived under constant threat of Yaudheyas' guerrilla raids. Vikramaditya responded by converting the entire Yaudheya land into a huge military camp. Lakhs of Yaudheya-Arjunayan-Kuninda men and women sacrificed themselves fighting for freedom. The imperial army took to executing any Yaudheya – civilian or military, they came across. Our beautiful Yaudheya land became a cemetery. In some years our cities lay in ruins, our water bodies and dams were destroyed...Most of the surviving Yaudheyas were forced to migrate elsewhere. Those who could muster some swords took to trade. They still nurture the hope in their hearts that one day they would return to the Yaudheya land.

And Vikramaditya? After conquering Yaudheyas he invaded Avanti. Malava and Vakataka troops supported the invasion. Jai had warned the Kshtrapas but they did not agree to fight the Guptas alongside Yaudheyas. Now they had no friends to extend support. Being a descendent of brave Chashtan and Rudradama, Rudrasena fought frantically bravely. But how long could he have fought? Within some months Avanti, Lat and Saurashtra were subjugated. Kshtrapa dynasty was wiped out forever. To commemorate his victories Vikramaditya issued silver coins-sixteen of which were equal to a dinar (gold coin). Upon these he got engraved- "Shrigupta Kulasya Maharajadhiraj Shri Chandragupta Vikramadityasya."